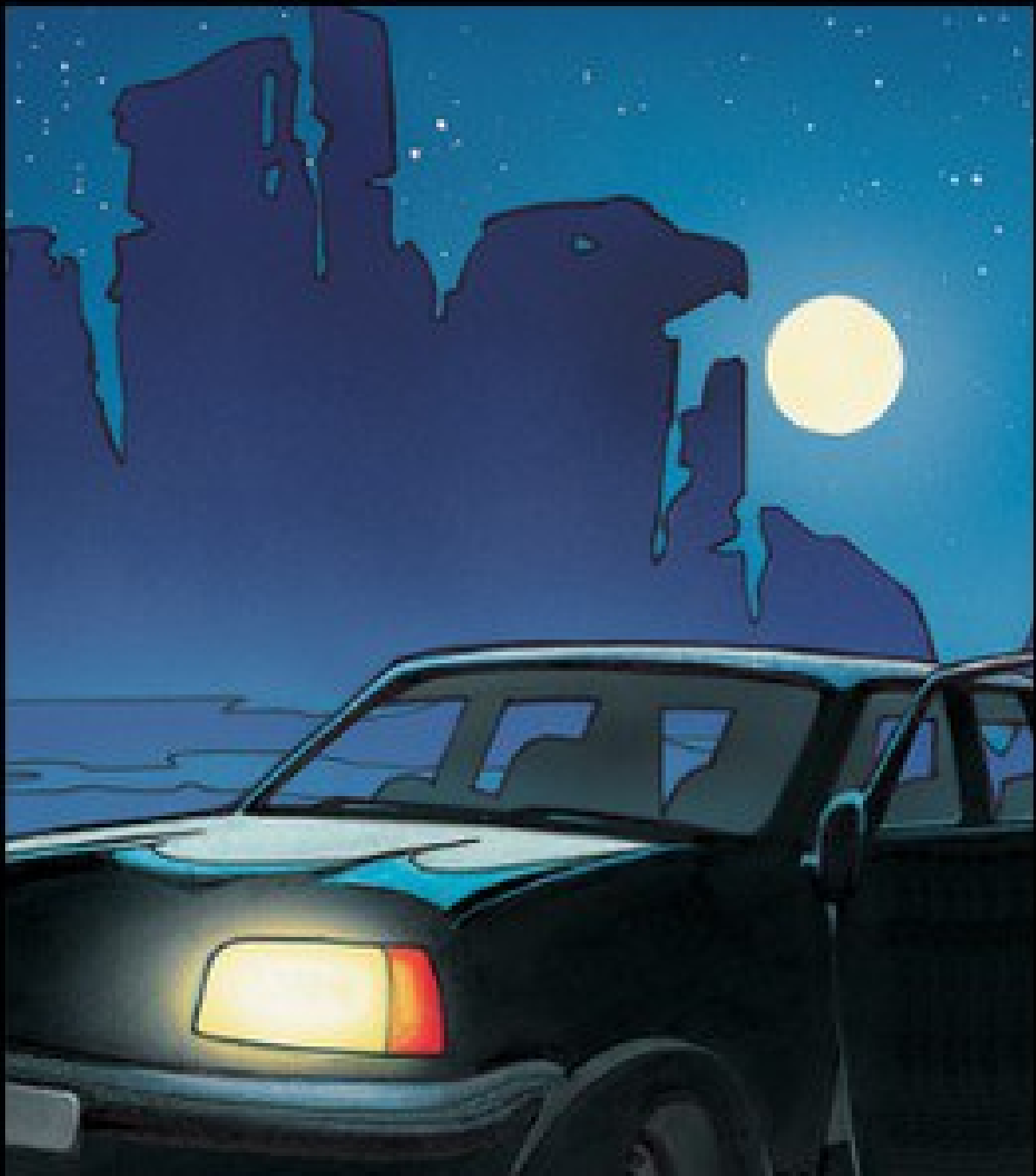


# THE INVESTIGATORS in

## THE MYSTERY OF THE VALLEY OF EAGLES





in

**THE MYSTERY  
OF THE  
VALLEY OF EAGLES**

Stranded in a remote mountain location, a woman wakes up inside her car. Her head hurts, and she has no idea where she is or what happened the night before. She only vaguely remembers seeing a person with an eagle head mask appearing under the light of a full moon. The police doubt the woman's sanity, but The Three Investigators believe her. During the next full moon, Jupiter, Pete and Bob set off to the Valley of Eagles to solve the mystery. In doing so, they experience a series of strange events.

The Three Investigators  
in  
The Mystery of the Valley of Eagles

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## 1. Memory Loss

The phone rang incessantly. The caller was really persistent. Normally Jupiter would have jumped up and answered the call long ago, as curious as he was. But there were moments when he hated the phone.

The day had been exhausting, especially since the physical education lessons had included fitness training, the torture of which Jupiter still felt in his bones. Exhausted, he sat on the small stairs of the old trailer which served The Three Investigators as an office and command centre for their detective work.

The sun blinded him and he narrowed his eyes as he watched a cat that had caught a mouse and was now playing with it. There were really more than enough mice in Uncle Titus Jones's salvage yard, even though Aunt Mathilda had already developed all conceivable methods to catch them. But in a salvage yard like this one, there were simply too many hiding places—old furniture, boxes, bottles, piles of wood, rubber tyres, tools, pails, ovens—not even Uncle Titus himself had an exact overview of his treasures. No wonder that occasionally one of the neighbouring cats would drop by in search of a fat meal.

Jupiter tried to ignore the annoying ringing of the telephone. He knew that sooner or later he would give in to the caller, but he already had a certain suspicion who it could be.

The cat just struck again. The mouse simply had no chance. Whenever it seemed to have caught an escape route, the cat would grab it and carry it back. It was an evil game until the deadly bite. Actually Jupiter liked cats, but he could not like this characteristic in them.

The phone was still ringing. The caller just didn't give up.

"All right," Jupiter thought to himself. "You have won... But I'll save the mouse first." He leaned over a bit and clapped his hands loudly. As expected, the cat winced in horror and threw an appraising glance in his direction. This short moment was enough for the mouse. It scurried away and disappeared under a pile of wood that had been standing around uselessly in the yard for several weeks. Now it had served its purpose, Jupiter thought, even if Aunt Mathilda didn't exactly like mice running all over the yard.

Satisfied, he climbed into the trailer. He almost tripped over one of Bob's files, which was lying on the floor. Then finally he grabbed the telephone receiver.

"Hello? Is that you, Uncle Titus?"

The woman on the other end of the line sounded at least as surprised as he was. "Uncle who? Oh, no, and actually I've already stopped expecting to reach somebody. Are you Jupiter Jones of The Three Investigators?"

Jupiter took a breath. Someone was calling The Three Investigators? So that's what this was all about. And he was worried that his uncle, who was somewhere in Rocky Beach buying up junk from a house, was calling to ask him to go there and help load up the truck.

"Sorry, ma'am. Yes, I am Jupiter Jones of The Three Investigators. Can I help you?"

"You sure can, young man. That's why I called you! But I don't want to talk about it over the phone. We should meet to talk about it. Can we set up an appointment?" She enquired.

"Of course, ma'am, why not?"

"Well, you sound so young... Are you even a real detective?"

“Ma’am, I can assure you that age does not matter being a detective,” replied Jupiter, annoyed. Again and again they had heard such expressions of doubt from adults.

“Pete Crenshaw, Bob Andrews and yours truly are proven investigators. We are The Three Investigators and we investigate anything. Puzzles and mysteries are our speciality. And so far we have solved many cases,” he explained, with a touch of pride. “I want to say that this has nothing to do with our age... or maybe it does, but it’s the other way round, because at a younger age, one simply does not approach a case as unimaginatively as an adult.”

“So he was right.”

“Who?” asked Jupiter curiously. “How did you actually come upon us?”

“The inspector. He said you might be able to help me.”

Jupiter laughed in disbelief. “Inspector Cotta? He referred you to us?”

“Yes. Inspector Cotta, that’s his name. He said that The Three Investigators will investigate anything—especially those that the police would not handle.”

Suddenly Jupiter was wide awake. “That sounds interesting, ma’am. But you must tell me a bit more.”

“Please, Jupiter, don’t always call me ‘ma’am’.”

“I’m sorry, but you haven’t told me your name.”

“Oh, have I actually forgotten that? My name is Sullivan, Mrs Ann Sullivan.”

Jupiter pulled out his pad and wrote down the name while she continued speaking.

“I’m—how can I explain this... I’ve lost my memory of a few hours. There is a gap, a hole, a blackout...”

“What are you talking about, Mrs Sullivan?”

“Well, there’s a few hours missing from my memory... I don’t know what I experienced and did during that time. That troubles me. Maybe something terrible has happened... or maybe it was nothing, nothing at all. I just have no idea. But that’s all I want to tell you over the phone. Will you help me?”

“I’ll have to ask my colleagues first,” Jupiter replied cautiously. “We’ll decide together. But your case sounds exciting. Anyway, I believe that nothing stands in the way of a meeting between us.”

“Good. What about tomorrow at one o’clock?”

Jupiter wondered. It was just after school. “All right. Where shall we meet?”

“I’ll invite you to The Car Zoo. It’s right around the corner from where I work. Meet me at my workplace, then we’ll go together.”

“Very nice!” Jupiter was thrilled. An invitation to The Car Zoo? It was an outlandish restaurant where the furnishings were constructed from restored car cabins and parts. Customers sat in half-open cars, so to speak, and dined on small tables welded on to the cars. Since the restaurant was not exactly cheap, the three of them have not dined there before.

“One o’clock tomorrow. We’ll be on time. Where is your workplace?”

“Sundown TV. Just ask for Ann Sullivan.”

“We will. See you tomorrow.” Jupiter hung up and thought about the conversation—a woman who worked in television, who could not recall a few hours of her life and wanted to know what happened to her during that time. That sounded promising... but already he was interrupted in his speculations.

“Juupeeterrr!” That was Aunt Mathilda. Jupiter looked at the clock. It was 6:30 pm. She should be setting the table for dinner, but even then, she just could not leave Jupiter alone for a while. He went to the trailer door and stuck his head out. “Yes?”



Aunt Mathilda stood in front of the yard office and had her hands clamped to her hips. “Where are you? Could you please—”

“—Bring out the dishes?” added Jupiter triumphantly. “Aunt Mathilda, I just always know what you want.”

“No, not that!” cried his aunt. “What makes you think so? I’ll set the table myself. You are needed more urgently. Titus just called to ask if you can help him load the truck. I told him you were on your way. It’s not that far from here—29 Memorial Road.”

“Aunt Mathilda, my muscles are aching,” protested the First Investigator. “I’d rather lie lengthwise on the bed!” In fact, what he really wanted to do was to phone Bob and Pete to tell them of a potential new case, but wisely he did not say that out loud.

“Please, Jupe. It’s too much for your uncle to do it alone!”

Jupiter moaned that his aunt always had to be so persistent! She simply wouldn’t tolerate any arguments.

“All right, all right, then... but only if there’s something special to eat later.”

“Lasagne and raspberry ice cream... Would that please you?”

“Done!” cried Jupiter. That was a ray of hope after all. “Twice the load for me.”

He locked the door to the trailer and ran to his bike. He found the neighbour’s cat dozing under the pedals of his bike. Jupiter looked at it critically. With a gentle nudge with his foot, he scared the cat away.

## 2. Not a Case for the Police

Sundown TV was one of the smaller TV stations in the area and was located on Santora Street, one of the main thoroughfares of Rocky Beach. Bob skilfully steered his Beetle through the busy street. It wasn't long before Jupiter, sitting next to his friend, had discovered the three-storey building of the television company.

"Bob, there's a free parking space right out front," Jupe said.

Bob nodded, steered his car to the marked area and turn off the engine.

"Didn't you see the 'Reserved' sign for this parking space?" Pete called out from the back seat. When they went out in Bob's car, that was his regular place, because Jupiter needed more legroom due to his full body, and in a Beetle it was at the front passenger seat.

"We'll be off in a moment," Jupiter replied and undid the safety belt. "From the drudgery with Uncle Titus yesterday, every one of my muscles hurts. Every one step less I have to walk would be most welcome."

"I think the reason for your weakness is more because of the double portion of lasagne you ate," joked Pete. "Or was it a triple portion?"

Bob looked briefly at Jupiter who took that joke calmly. Then Bob turned back to look through the rear window. "We'll park here," he decided, "but I'll have to park my car straighter." Carefully, he reversed. "Oops!"

He almost hit a man who had just walked across the car park. At the last moment, the man jumped to the side.

"Watch it with that piece of junk!" he shouted. The man's red-striped baseball cap had slipped to cover his face.

"I wouldn't have hit you!" Bob shouted through the rolled-down side window and then murmured softly to himself: "He called my car a piece of junk! What a jerk!"

The man shook his head and walked on.

Jupiter wrinkled his nose. "Not everyone appreciates a car with character."

They got out and headed for the building's lobby. A couch and a couple of empty armchairs stood on the right-hand side, while further back, the receptionist was enthroned like a dragon in front of her telephone. She watched the newcomers suspiciously. Bob already classified her as an almost insurmountable obstacle. Then he remembered that they had an appointment.

"Where is Jupe?" Pete turned around. The First Investigator really did walk very slowly behind them. "Are you walking on eggshells, Jupe?" Pete grinned. "So Uncle Titus really got to you after all?"

"Well, at least he gave me a few bucks for it," Jupe quipped. "Still better than that boring physical training for nothing."

"I could use a little change myself," Bob remarked. "I might be allowed to hold up a few cables as a temp at Sundown TV. It's a lot more pleasant than unloading washing machines and boxes of books."

"It depends on the TV show," Jupiter said. "Imagine if you had to endure ninety minutes of a talk show."

In the meantime, they had arrived at the reception. The woman seemed to have heard their conversation. "Gentlemen, if you're looking for jobs, you've come for nothing. There are no job openings here at the moment."

"We are not looking for a job here," replied Jupiter. "We have an appointment with Mrs Sullivan."

Her face changed, if only to some extent. "Well, that's different. Third floor, Room 302." Then she turned to Bob. "First of all, would you please move your car out of Mr Caddy's car park?"

Bob looked at her with wide eyes.

"Well, your car there... It's in Mr Caddy's spot," the woman continued. "He is the owner of Sundown TV and he'll be back any minute."

Bob turned around, but it was already too late. A big Jeep rolled up and positioned itself directly behind Bob's Beetle, blocking it from going out.

An about fifty-year-old tanned man wearing fashionable sunglasses got out of the car. A moment later, he walked to the lobby, greeted the woman at reception with a short nod and entered the lift, whose doors had just opened.

"Come on, fellas," said Jupiter. The Three Investigators stormed towards the lift.

Mr Caddy put his glasses up for a moment and looked at his expensive watch. He paid very little attention to the investigators. The doors closed. The Three Investigators were alone with the man.

Bob pushed the button to the third floor, then he turned to the owner of Sundown TV.

"Sir, I'm afraid you've blocked my car out there in the car park," he began carefully. "We would be going off soon. Could you please—"

Mr Caddy looked surprised. "Well, you took my parking space," he interrupted Bob. He seemed amused. "It's all your fault. Well, you better think of something. Maybe you can call a taxi if you have the money. Otherwise, you can walk home... I have more important things to do."

The lift stopped at the first floor and the doors opened. Mr Caddy bent down and took his briefcase. He got out with a big smile on his face. "Have a nice day, boys."

"Sucker," Bob said as the doors closed again. "Arrogant ape."

"He's probably getting tired of having his parking space taken all the time," Jupiter tried to muster another touch of understanding. "Certainly it was not the first time this has happened to him... But look what he has dropped!"

Jupiter bent down and picked something up, but by then they had already reached the third floor. The lift doors whirled apart. "We'll look at it later," Jupiter decided and put his find in his trouser pocket. "Let's go!"

"Shouldn't we give that thing back to him?" muttered Pete.

"That ape?" Bob quipped.

At that moment, they reached Mrs Sullivan's office. Her name plate was clearly legible and placed on door with the word 'Secretary' below it.

Jupiter entered first, Bob and Pete followed. Unfortunately, Mrs Sullivan was not alone in the room. Her boss—it had to be her boss—stood beside her desk, with a piece of a paper in his hand. He looked at the boys with narrowed eyes.

"What do you want?" he moaned. "We have no temp jobs! How did you even get in here?"

"Excuse me, Mr..."

"Martin. Fred Martin. Production Manager of Sundown TV. Mrs Sullivan, where are my glasses?"

"In your office, sir." Mrs Sullivan, a woman in her thirties, stood up. "On the desk. Mr Martin, it's all right with these boys. I made an appointment with them." She looked at The Three Investigators from top to bottom. "Actually, I thought you were gonna wait downstairs."

"The receptionist directed us up here," claimed Jupiter.

"Anyway, I'm famished," she explained in a more friendly tone. "Can I go for my break, Mr Martin?"

"Go ahead. Anyway, I'm glad you're back at work."

It was really only a stone's throw to The Car Zoo. Pete admired the miniature car models that were displayed in the window of the restaurant. Inside as always, it was crowded at lunch time, but Mrs Sullivan had reserved a table, or rather, a Rolls Royce, because all guests were sitting in stylishly restored old car cabins, which were open to one side.

Satisfied, Jupiter dropped himself on the back seat and looked around. "This is almost as beautiful as Worthington's," he murmured.

"Only the food is better," remarked Pete, who had sat next to him in the back seat. "But you're probably still full from last night."

"Not at all," Jupiter said and suddenly stopped. "Look, isn't that the man we almost hit just now?"

Pete and Bob followed his gaze. The man in the red-striped baseball cap was sitting at the bar having a beer... and he didn't look particularly happy.

"You mean that sourpuss there?" Mrs Sullivan asked. She had chosen a single chair, just like Bob. "He just came to see Mr Martin."

"Oh. What did he want?"

Instead of an answer, Mrs Sullivan looked at Jupiter with amusement. "You really are detectives, as curious as you are," she said. "But I'm sorry, I don't know. He was in the room with Mr Martin, and later, Mr Martin himself accompanied him downstairs."

"... Which is unusual," remarked Jupiter.

"Right." She looked at him in surprise. "But how do you know?"

"Not hard to guess. Usually the secretaries take the visitors outside, don't they?"

Mrs Sullivan nodded. She flipped through the menu. "Well, this is gonna make your mouth water. Help yourself without hesitation," she encouraged the boys.

They didn't need to be told twice and when the waiter appeared, he took a handsome order. But the fact that Jupiter ordered a large plate of pasta as a second starter was a bit embarrassing for Bob.

"Jupiter didn't get much to eat yesterday..." Bob made an excuse for Jupiter, but Mrs Sullivan nodded her head to tell him that it was all right.

"Detectives need to fill their stomachs," she said, "and you're here to help me."

"Yes, ma'am." Jupiter reached into his pocket and pulled out a slightly folded card, which he put on the table in front of Mrs Sullivan. "Otherwise we wouldn't have come."

Mrs Sullivan took the card and looked at it. It said:



“That sounds promising.”

“Solving mysteries is our speciality,” Pete took the floor. “We work discreetly and conscientiously. If you want to find out what happened to you during those hours you can’t remember, you’ve come to the right place.”

That’s exactly what Mrs Sullivan wanted to hear. After the waiter brought the drinks, Jupiter thought it was appropriate for the woman to slowly satisfy the detectives’ curiosity.

“Why couldn’t Inspector Cotta help you, Mrs Sullivan?” He steered the conversation back to its original subject. “Was it because no crime has been committed?”

Mrs Sullivan reached for her glass. “Well, that’s just it. I don’t really know. It bothers me that something happened in my life that I don’t know about. I’d like to keep track of my activities. Can you understand that?”

“Of course,” said Jupiter. Who, if not him, should be able to understand that.

She kept on talking and probably had to find the right way in first. “It’s all very embarrassing. I was afraid that I might even be to blame. Maybe I have a mental crack as I am getting older slowly. If no one believes you, you begin to doubt yourself involuntarily. So I went to the police. The inspector was very kind and listened to everything.

“But he said there was no real reason for the police to investigate. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side, Inspector Cotta sent a police car to check it out. But his colleague found nothing.” She faltered, sensing the confused looks of the boys.

“But I think I should tell you everything in order,” she said, “from the beginning...”

### 3. The Curse of the Eagle

After the waiter had served the starters, Mrs Sullivan began to report. She made an effort and proved to be a quick and accurate narrator. The Three Investigators needed only to ask a few questions.

“It was almost two months ago. I was in Silver City one weekend to visit my nephew. Well, we were going to settle on an inheritance thing and it went a lot faster and better than I had expected. So I was able to do a little more in Silver City before I had to drive home. A wonderful, sunny day was just coming to an end when, after a while, I came to a junction where a road leads through the Magic Mountains to the coast.”

Mrs Sullivan took a sip of water. “I don’t know if you know that area. Normally, one drives by this inconspicuous place without leaving the highway. Going on the highway is faster than on the narrow unpaved road that runs through the mountains. This is one of the reasons why hardly anyone chooses this route.” She laughed. “And besides, all those potholes will put a lot of strain on your car. But I didn’t care about that then. I was in a good mood, and looking forward to the drive through the mountains. I had already heard a lot about the Magic Mountains, about their untouched nature, their wilderness, and also about the road that leads through them. I had firmly resolved to take this route this time—no matter what the time of day, should it be evening, or even night.

“There is something else I must mention—that road is a very old route from which the legend goes that horses and people used to disappear going through it. A very secluded, supposedly dangerous tribe known as the Accipi used to live there in the mountains, but that was a long time ago, perhaps over a hundred years ago. I didn’t really think of any danger that evening. Maybe it would have been better—”

The waiter came and asked if they needed anything else. Jupiter ordered another Coke. Bob joined him while Pete chose a freshly squeezed orange juice for health reasons.

When the waiter was out of earshot, Mrs Sullivan continued her report: “It was already getting dark when I drove along the mountain road. But I was feeling great. The road goes across a plain, and only after a distance, the mountains begin. I alone in the Magic Mountains and that had a touch of adventure. I only met the first car after half an hour! The night came pretty fast. I don’t know if you guys know that, but suddenly everything that looked familiar or interesting a moment ago turned into a cool, strange world.

“I had to concentrate more and more on the road. There is no real boundary on the sides, just the occasional guide posts, most of which have fallen over or weathered. Fortunately, the moon was rising, but it didn’t do much to cheer me up.” She took a few bites.

““What happens if my car breaks down?” I thought. Then I’m lost. Fortunately, the tank was three-quarters full. Sure, I filled up in Silver City. I drove on, but slowly I was no longer sure whether I could still remember everything... I think this was where the first gaps began. But I remember very clearly how I had suddenly activated the interior lock of the car—to be on the safe side, so that no one from the outside could get in. Then my courage deserted me as I drove on.”

Mrs Sullivan remained silent and poked about in her dish, lost in thought. The Three Investigators felt the woman’s inner tension rising the closer she got to the event she did not

remember.

"I drove and drove and more and more I had to think about the Indian's curse," she continued. "The Magic Mountains were sacred land to the Indians. According to myth, if an outsider defiled the place, he would be turned into a stone, a tree, or an animal, depending on what he did... I knew that from our \$100,001 show on Sundown TV, where we had a contestant who knew all about American Indian myths. You know our hit show?"

"Oh, I'm more into the movie channel," Jupiter said and took a sip of Coke. "If I watch TV at all."

Bob nodded. "I also watch feature movies more than TV shows."

"Sport for me," Pete said succinctly.

Mrs Sullivan laughed. "Well, then our marketing department still has a job to do. But back to that story... It was said that the curse was particularly effective in a certain valley of the Magic Mountains. Some people call that place the 'Valley of Eagles'. The Indians called it the 'Valley of the Curse'. If you drive through this valley, they say every rock and every tree was transformed from a person."

She took a break and looked at the boys. "I'm telling you this in such detail because I think it matters," she said. "I told the police about it too. But they didn't think it was significant. If you listen to me, then I'm glad."

"Everything can have a meaning," said Jupiter, "though often different from what one might first assume. So leave nothing out."

Mrs Sullivan nodded. "Well, I have to say one more thing about this Indian story... The curse itself is called 'The Curse of the Eagle'. It seemed that the medicine man of the tribe disguised himself as an eagle and transformed the intruders in a ceremony. That's why they say many of the rocks resemble the face of an eagle." She looked up. "Of course, these things come to mind when you're driving alone on a dark night in an uninhabited area. By then, I had long since arrived in the middle of the mountains. Anyway, I can remember a few ghostly images—moonlit rocks that looked like big bird heads."

"You always see a bit of what you expect," said Jupiter.

"Exactly, Jupiter. This is what happened to me. And the rocks seemed to confirm the old stories. So I drove along this road—not fast, you must know, as I felt too unsafe for that. I was afraid and my gaze kept wandering into the shady surroundings on both sides of the road, as if something cruel was about to fall upon me." She looked up. "But at about this point, I can't remember exactly what happened next. It's as if my memory has been slowly turned off, like a battery coming to an end. But I do remember one thing clearly. A dark truck appeared in front of me like a black wall. It drove slowly and without light. I saw it only at the last second and I remember that I stepped on the brakes to avoid hitting it." Then she paused.

"Then what?" Bob held his breath.

"Then I can only remember individual images. Nothing is logical anymore. I don't know if I really experienced it or if terrible dream images are mixed into my memory. Anyway, I see this black truck. I think I've been driving behind it for a while. I probably wanted to overtake it because it was so slow. I remember he was driving in the middle of the road so it was impossible to get past him on that narrow road."

The Three Investigators were sitting on the edge of their seats.

Pete emptied his glass in one go. "So?" he asked.

"Suddenly the truck slowed down and stopped, yes, I think that's how it must have been. I also stopped and sat behind the wheel, staring at it in fear. I probably never would have

found the reverse gear as I was so excited. And then the driver's door of the truck opened. I saw it like in slow motion. A creature came out. Slowly it came towards me."

Now, of all times, the waiter had to come back. Proudly he presented the main courses in front of them, but the boys looked at him more annoyed than hungry. They wanted to hear the rest of Mrs Sullivan's story.

"Everything all right, ma'am?"

"Yes, thank you. You can take this with you," Mrs Sullivan gave him a half-empty plate.

The waiter took the plate from her and served. "Are there any other requests? Perhaps the gentlemen?"

Impatiently the three boys shook their heads. The waiter withdrew again, much too slowly, as Jupiter thought.

"Please go on, Mrs Sullivan!" he urged and took his glass in his hand.

Mrs Sullivan nodded. "I would love to tell you all about what I experienced then, but I can't remember. All I can tell you are images from my dreams. I often wake up at night and see it before me. It is terrible. This dream repeats itself often. The images haunt me at night." She trembled and Bob wondered for a moment if it could be so torturous for her by just describing the events. But if they were to help her, there was no other way. After all, she had asked for the appointment voluntarily.

"It was the eagle head," Mrs Sullivan finally said. "I really saw it—an eagle's head with its horrible eyes. I thought it was coming to turn me into stone."

"Wow!" Bob took it away.

Mrs Sullivan shrugged helplessly. "That's all I know. It's really confusing."

"You have no idea what happened next?" Jupiter held on to his Coke even though the glass was already empty.

Mrs Sullivan took a deep breath. "No," she said in a firmer voice. "Nothing," she said. "I dream other things sometimes. It's very confusing. Every now and then, a rock appears. It is lighted by the moon and it's shiny. It looks like a huge, threatening eagle's head—bigger than any I've ever seen, but I don't know if it's just a dream image or reality... but what does reality mean? For me, it's real."

"So you think you really saw it that night," Bob noted. "But where exactly was that? Apart from the rock, are there other striking features of the landscape that appear in your dreams?"

Mrs Sullivan closed her eyes and concentrated for a few seconds. "A winding road," she said without opening her eyes. "To the left is a hillside with trees, and to the right are the mountains leading to that big rocky head... it's enthroned on the ridge... The moon is shining... I think there's someone else with me, guiding me, but I don't see him." She shook herself and looked at Bob. "You know, they're really just little bits and pieces of images that appear to me."

Jupiter nodded and took the floor. "Since the incident, have you been to the Magic Mountains to find the place again?"

Mrs Sullivan shook her head in disgust. "There is no way that I would do that!"

"I can understand that." The First Investigator pinched his lower lip and thought. "But once again, back to the truck. What do you think that man from the truck did to you?"

"He probably grabbed me... but my memory is gone, like a black hole."

"Maybe it was the shock," Bob thought. "I once read about how you can lose your memory when you've experienced something terrible."

Mrs Sullivan nodded. "A kind of repression, yes. Maybe I should see a psychologist instead of you detectives. Well, Inspector Cotta strongly recommended you... But



psychologists... I don't know."

"At what point does your memory begin to return," Jupiter asked quickly, before Mrs Sullivan was too much influenced by the thought of breaking off the conversation and consulting a psychologist instead.

She cleared her throat and continued with her report: "The next thing I remember is a man calling out to me. I open my eyes. I'm sitting in my car, which is on the side of the road. The sun is shining. So it's daytime—late morning, to be precise. The man I heard was a motorist who stopped. My head hurts terribly. Only now do I notice that my clothes are torn. I have scratches on my hands. The man keeps knocking on the window. 'Are you all right?' he asked. I wind the window down. 'Help me,' I say. He wants to know what's wrong with me. I can't tell him. 'Please take me away from here,' I whisper.

"Well, that's what the man did and took me in his car to the next town, straight to a doctor. I kept quiet the whole way. The doctor couldn't find anything wrong with me. He couldn't explain where my headaches were coming from. He asked if I often had migraines and gave me some medication. Later my car was picked up. It was perfectly all right." Mrs Sullivan took a knife and fork. She had hardly touched her food. It had to be cold by now.

The Three Investigators watched her for a moment. They had to digest her story first.

After a while, Jupiter broke the silence. "I suspect that by now you have gone through your memories over and over again, always looking for reliable clues."

She nodded. "You said it. A few days ago, I finally went to the police—to Inspector Cotta, as I told you. He was very friendly and listened to everything carefully. But finally, he could only shrug his shoulders. 'What should I do,' he said. He said there was no damage, except for a few scratches. No theft, no violent crime.

"But he's a proper policeman. He still sent an officer to the place where the driver found me. But the policeman did not find any suspicious traces. Nothing." She looked at her plate. "At least the inspector didn't immediately declare me crazy." She poked around in her vegetables.

"No, Inspector Cotta is not like many other policemen," Jupiter said. "At least not always. But I conclude from your last remark that even among your friends and acquaintances, there were people who did not quite believe your experience... Do you even doubt it yourself?"

Mrs Sullivan swallowed a bite. "You've guessed correctly. Some of my friends didn't believe me either. My boss, Mr Martin, just shook his head and I was really close to questioning everything myself..." She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled something out. "... If it wasn't for this..."

## 4. A Fair Price

The Three Investigators leaned forward and saw the small item she was holding in her hand. It was a small silver-coloured eagle head.

Jupiter took it and looked at it in fascination. "It is carved from wood and painted... It looks really scary!" He passed it on to Pete.

"I only found this item in my car recently," said Mrs Sullivan. "It had slipped under the seat. I have never bought or possessed such an eagle head. However, an acquaintance dared to claim that I got it for myself to justify my story." She sighed and took a sip of her wine.

Pete stared at his empty glass. "I believe your story," he said. "You can't make up something like that. In the first place, why should you?"

"Yeah, why should I?" Mrs Sullivan nodded and looked at her watch. "My goodness," she exclaimed. "Oh, we've had quite a chat! I should have been back in the office by now! Mr Caddy wants the TV ratings faxed over to his beach house. He's always so anxious to know the station's performance. He doesn't know what to do with all his money..." She turned around. "Waiter!"

The waiter approached with a dignified step.

"The bill please. I'll take care of it, and please wrap up my dessert."

"Very well, ma'am. Did you enjoy your meal?"

"Excellent. Unfortunately, we didn't have the most pleasant subject to talk about."

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

"It's not your doing, of course."

When the waiter disappeared with her credit card, Mrs Sullivan turned to the detectives again. "Well, how about it? Will you take my case and solve the mystery of the Valley of Eagles?"

The Three Investigators looked at each other. Jupiter registered only approving glances. "With pleasure," he said. "We cannot guarantee success, but we can promise to try. And a committed effort is often followed by a happy ending."

Mrs Sullivan smiled happily. "You put it very nicely. That just leaves the matter of the fee."

"We don't take fees," Jupiter said and smiled mischievously at Pete and Bob. "But if you invite us here again, I don't think any of us will mind."

"Done!" Mrs Sullivan got up. "That's what I call a fair price."

They huddled towards the exit. Bob looked around and noticed that the man with the red-striped baseball cap was no longer at the bar.

"What are you going to do now?" Mrs Sullivan asked as they walked back down the street.

Jupiter, walking next to her, answered evasively: "We'll go to our headquarters and discuss." Secretly, he was already planning a trip to the Magic Mountains, but he expected Pete to give resistance to the idea, especially if strange things were really going on there.

Mrs Sullivan was satisfied with the answer for now. Meanwhile, they had arrived at Sundown TV. Bob was relieved to see that his Beetle was no longer blocked from leaving. Mr Caddy must have left as his car was not there.

They said goodbye to Mrs Sullivan, who asked the boys to contact her if they had any further questions. "And good luck with your investigation."

The Three Investigators thanked her and got into the Beetle. The return trip was very quiet. All three of them were thinking about their new case.

A good ten minutes later, Bob steered the car into The Jones Salvage Yard. He stopped next to a scrap Cadillac that Uncle Titus had dragged into the yard for dismantling. Bob turned off the engine and they got out.

Pete broke the silence. "This looks almost the same as those at The Car Zoo," he noted with a side glance at the Cadillac.

"And Aunt Mathilda's food is not to be sneezed at either," Bob added with a laugh as they crossed the yard.

"Especially not the lasagne," hummed Jupiter. He opened the door to the trailer. They grabbed a bottle of water and sat down.

Jupiter unscrewed the cap, took a sip and passed the bottle on. "What do we have, fellas? A woman on a lonely car journey through the mountains, a memory that disappears, and gets dream images of an Indian ritual. All in all, a most curious story... Do you believe her?"

"Yes," Pete said immediately. "You can't make something up like that."

Jupiter shook his head. "I wouldn't be so sure. We have already experienced incredible things from our past cases. But why would she make up a story like that?"

"... And then make them sound so credible," Bob added. He was clearly on Pete's side. "She almost trembled when she spoke about the Indian rituals. I, for one, believe her too."

"I guess you're right," Jupiter gave in. "She has asked us for help and there is no reason for us to doubt her."

"Especially since she found the wooden figure," Pete added. "The eagle's head."

"—Which she admittedly could have got it herself later," Jupiter interjected. He liked to put things to the test. "Let's assume that what she says is true. What happened to her then? Why is there this gap in her memory?"

Bob repeated what he had already suspected in the restaurant. "She had a terrible experience and then her memory went blank. It is a strange but not unusual psychological process."

"Memory loss," mumbled Jupiter. "To be precise, psychogenic amnesia... also known as dissociative amnesia."

"What?" Bob asked, rolling his eyes. He took a pad from the table and handed it to Jupiter. "Could you please write that down?"

Jupiter did it with a straight face.

"I'll check this again at the library," Bob took the note and put it in his shirt pocket.

Pete was already thinking in a different direction. "The Indians," he said. "It may also have something to do with them. They are very knowledgeable about the effects of plants. Perhaps they mixed a potion of intoxicants and poisonous plants and given it into her."

Jupiter nodded. "Good idea. Hallucinogenic plants. There's only one catch—Mrs Sullivan implied that there were no Indians living in the mountains anymore. But we should check that out. Bob, will you take care of it right away?"

"Of course, Jupe. What was that again? Hallowing plants?"

"Hallucinogenic plants—intoxicating, psychoactive plants, so to speak. Isn't that what you meant, Pete?"

"Sure. I just couldn't express it as elegantly as you, Jupe."

Now Jupiter made a grimace. "Why do you go to school for?" he asked pointedly. "Just for gym class?"

“Very funny, Jupe.”

The First Investigator cleared his throat and asked if they should call Inspector Cotta and tell him everything. Bob and Pete voted against it, as hardly any further information could be expected. The inspector didn't seem to take it as seriously as they did. Moreover, it could well be that Cotta regretted recommending Mrs Sullivan to The Three Investigators and he might even advise them against this case. So it was better to take care of the man who found Mrs Sullivan in the mountains. Bob offered to get the address.

“You might as well ask for the contestant of this \$100,001 show,” Jupiter added. “That guy, the Indian expert.”

“All right.” Bob looked at his watch. “The library is still open. I'd best be on my way.”

Jupiter nodded. “And you, Pete, please go to a book store in Rocky Beach and get us a map of the Magic Mountains.”

Pete looked at him, startled. “You're not planning on going there, are you?” he asked in horror. “There's an unpredictable Indian spirit in the mountains! I think that's too—”

“—Dangerous? Pete, let's find out about that place first...” Jupiter reassured him. “Nothing more...” Not yet, he added in his thoughts.

## 5. A Second Lead

Bob was finished with dinner and was about to devote himself to dessert when his father finally appeared.

Mrs Andrews looked at her husband reproachfully. "You were supposed to come back early today, Mel! I cooked extra—fillet steaks with baked potatoes—your favourite. Even Bob was on time. After all, it's your birthday. Don't tell me another appointment has come up."

Mr Andrews cleared his throat and sat down at the table with them. "Thank you! I appreciate that," he said. "But it's just not easy being a newspaper journalist, even if it's on my birthday."

He moved his plate forward and helped himself. "Today at the meeting, there was an argument about an incredible story. Once again, the meeting went on and on." He took a breath and looked at his wife. "I hate these endless meetings as much as you do."

"I don't want to hear about your work," Bob's mother said, pouring herself some Californian white wine. "And certainly not about the incredible story."

But Bob noticed. After all, he was always interested in strange and mysterious events of all kinds. Even though The Three Investigators were already working on a new case, he asked cautiously: "So, will the story will be in the papers tomorrow?"

"No, not at all," his father replied. "I would have liked to print the story, or at least followed it up, but the editor-in-chief was against it. He thought it was all complete nonsense."

"Why?" Bob drilled.

"Now you're back home," his mother intervened, "can we not talk about your work, but perhaps something completely different—like where we're going on our next vacation." Mr Andrews nodded and chewed on a baked potato.

"Vacation, yes, a good subject. But if Bob is interested in what happened..."

"Very much so," Bob voiced his support. "Mum, we'll think about where we're going after this, I promise."

"If you say so." Mrs Andrews was no longer able to resist the pressures of the situation. She stood up. "The espresso should be ready," she said and went into the kitchen.

"So?" Bob urged his father to continue.

Mr Andrews shook his head. "Really, it was a promising story," he began. "It all started with a phone call. It ended up with me by chance. A man called and he told me a strange story and I thought I'd better handle it. This man was travelling through the Magic Mountains."

Bob startled. "Magic Mountains? That... that..." he stuttered.

His father looked at him with astonishment. "Did you choked?"

"No, nothing's wrong with me," Bob said quickly. "Go on."

"All right. He drove along a narrow road that goes through the Magic Mountains. It's not very well fortified and used to be a road for the treks to the west coast when the Europeans settled here. I did look at the route on the map."

"A dangerous road," announced Mrs Andrews, who had returned from the kitchen with two steaming cups and heard the last words. "There was once a tribe of Indians living in the mountains."

Mr Andrews looked up in surprise. "That's right, our Indian expert knows her stuff!"

"Sure." Mrs Andrews sat back down at the table, but now with much more interest in the subject.

Bob's father went on. "The man reported that a few days ago he had driven through the mountains at night. He is supposedly an insurance salesman who was visiting a client in Silver City. He remembers almost nothing about his return trip that evening. There are several hours of which he has no idea of what happened. He woke up the next morning. His car was on the side of the road, lonely and abandoned. He was sitting in the passenger seat. The strange thing was that his clothes were torn and damp. He had scratches on his arms. His head was pounding with pain. The car was splashed with mud. It took him more than an hour to wake up completely.

"When he had come around, he drove carefully to the next town, where he first rested at a park. He could not explain all this to himself. That was as much as he told me, but only after I had asked several times. He suggested a meeting to tell me more about it, and he even agreed on getting the story published in the newspaper."

"But the meeting never happened," Bob surmised. He was on pins and needles. The parallels with Mrs Sullivan's case were obvious.

"No. The caller demanded money for his story. He wanted to sell it to us, exclusively to the *Los Angeles Times*. He would tell me the exact place in the mountains and I should investigate and take photos together with him. But the amount he wanted was outrageously high. When I told my editor about the call, he threw a tantrum. He shouted: 'He only invented all this to make money', and so on. At our editorial meeting there was a fundamental discussion about the circumstances as to when money should buy stories. But of course, I would have to check everything first." Mr Andrews noticed that in describing the event, he had forgotten to eat. He proceeded to put a fork full of potatoes in his mouth. Mrs Andrews watched him in silence.

Bob couldn't take it anymore. "That man, did you say what his name was?"

"He introduced himself as Taylor."

"So this Taylor guy, has he hinted at anything else? Does he remember anything at all?"

Mr Andrews nodded and swallowed the portion without chewing. "He did. He said something about a bear man... who threatened him."

Mrs Andrews listened. "What did this creature look like?"

"I don't know. That's all Taylor was willing to say, because I think I'd already got more out of him than he wanted. Anyway, Mr Taylor is certain that he saw the bear man that night. He thought he was a mythical creature."

"It fits," explained Bob's mother. In the meantime, she was very involved. She'd forgotten all about her vacation plans. The information about the bear man was all over her.

"It's an old myth," she explained. "It probably originated with the Accipi Indians. The bear man always turned up when it was a matter of life and death. For example, when a child was about to be born or when an Indian was about to die. So he was a welcome guest on the one hand, but on the other hand also a threatening one. This ambiguity is often found in old Accipi legends."

"I heard about it at school," Bob said. In fact, he had read about the Accipi and their old rituals at the library in the afternoon and then had been told everything again by Sam Porter, the contestant on the Sundown TV show. It had been a long telephone conversation, for there

were endless Indian myths, and Porter had described them all down to the last detail—among them had been the figure of the bear man.

But Bob was surprised that Taylor had encountered the bear man instead of the eagle's head—as had experienced by Mrs Sullivan. It was at this point that the two stories began to diverge.

“But the Indian tribe that lived in the Magic Mountains has disappeared,” Bob's father explained. “The European settlers drove them away.”

“Yes, unfortunately,” his mother replied. “In the end, the Accipi couldn't match the weapons of the European settlers... Maybe some of them survived and have been hiding there for decades.”

Mr Andrews nodded at her. “Maybe so. At least the old myth of the bear man seems to be coming alive again,” he said. “Taylor claimed that ever since this encounter, he kept dreaming of the bear man. It's crazy, isn't it?”

Bob wasn't so sure. “Dad, why did you believe his story?”

“Well, Bob, I can't exactly explain it to you. Of course, I'm not completely sure. I would have liked to checked it out on the spot, face-to-face, but after that argument in the editorial office...” He made a discarding gesture. “Oh, well, maybe I'll meet him after all.”

“We could take care of it,” Bob quickly suggested.

“You?”

“Well, The Three Investigators. We'll check it out and if we have the impression that there's an exciting story behind it, we'll let you know. That way you won't have to deal with your stupid editor-in-chief for a while.”

“I don't know... Taylor doesn't really seem like a likeable guy.”

“We'll be careful,” Bob promised. “We'll only talk to him... and what's the worst that can happen? We'll let you know. Do you have his address?”

“Just a phone number where he can be reached.” Mr Andrews was still undecided. But then he pulled out his wallet and handed Bob a little note. “You can go ahead, Bob.”

## 6. Contact

The next morning, Bob planned to get to school as fast as possible. Ten minutes before the usual time, he kissed his surprised mother goodbye on the cheek and clamped his school bag on the bicycle carrier. By the time he locked his bicycle at the school yard, he was almost a quarter of an hour early.

Bob looked around. Some of his friends were focussed on a new hand-held computer game, but there was no trace of Jupe or Pete. As feared, they appeared only seconds before school started, and so Bob had to wait until the first break before he could finally pull Jupiter and Pete aside to tell them everything.

“We have a second victim,” he blurted out. “And I have his phone number!”

“Take it easy,” said Jupiter. “One thing at a time, please.”

Bob told his friends what his father had told him. For the two other detectives, the news of the appearance of Mr Taylor had the expected effect—Jupiter and Pete started talking wildly.

“Then Mrs Sullivan was definitely right,” exclaimed Pete.

“But what’s this with the bear man?” Jupiter asked at the same time.

“This is all starting to creep me out.” That was Pete.

“Or maybe they both lied...”

“Who knows how many others have encountered this?”

“Perhaps Taylor and Sullivan know each other and are in cahoots...”

“Those Indians probably still live there...”

“Maybe somebody else is pulling the strings behind the scenes...”

“Bob, what about the contestant on the \$100,001 show? Did you call him?”

Bob’s gaze had wandered back and forth between the two of them, like in a tennis match. Now he nodded. “I think the candidate is out of the running. He’s a history nut who’s over seventy years old and yapped his ear off—just like you two are doing now.”

Suddenly they noticed that they were alone in the school yard. Shocked, Jupe looked at his watch. “The third period has been running for ten minutes! Should we still go back to class?”

“It’s gonna be a thunderstorm either way,” Bob said.

“Hmm,” Jupiter thought.

After school, The Three Investigators immediately cycled to their headquarters at the salvage yard. The extra homework they had been given from school would be done later as there were more important things to do now. Bob pulled out the slip of paper on which he had written down Mr Taylor’s phone number.

Pete picked up the phone. “Give me the number, Bob.”

“How are you gonna approach this?” Bob asked. “Mr Taylor won’t tell us anything unless we offer him money. After all, he wants to sell his story at a high price.”

Pete shrugged his shoulders. “What if we said we were journalists?”

“From the school paper or what?” Bob laughed bitterly and Pete was offended.



Then Jupiter intervened. “We’ll just tell him that we have contact with Bob’s father and then casually let him know that we have good connections with the media, for example, Mr Caddy, the owner of Sundown TV... That’s got to impress him.”

“That ape? Jupe, I think you’re crazy!” The name alone was enough to incur Bob’s wrath.

Jupiter remained calm. “Gee, Bob, it doesn’t matter. It’s all about getting Taylor curious.”

“All right. So, you want to call, Jupe?”

“No,” Pete said. “I’m not giving up the phone. I don’t understand why Jupe always gets to make the important calls—as if we’re useless.”

Jupiter moaned. “Whatever... Okay, you call, Pete. But if you mess this up, you have to... you’ll have to clean my bike.”

“I’d better buy you a new one right now. Your bike is all held together by dirt.”

Jupiter grinned and had to admit defeat. The Second Investigator dialled the phone number.

“Taylor.”

“Good afternoon, Mr Taylor. This is Pete Crenshaw.” Then he went straight to the point. “My friends and I would like to meet you.”

“Why would I want to do that?” Taylor seemed gruff, but he was also curious.

“We would like to talk about something that happened to you.”

“Oh. Who are you? A journalist?”

“In a way. A newspaper editor told us about your trip through the Magic Mountains.”

“Was it Mr Andrews of the *Los Angeles Times*? Was it from him you got my number?” Taylor asked.

“That’s him. He finds your story interesting.”

“Then why doesn’t he call me himself?”

“Well, I’m afraid his hands are tied. His paper can’t buy your story, but maybe we could set up a contact where you could get your story out.”

“But I’d like to see a whole lot of dollars. Where are you going to refer me to? Not your high school paper?”

Pete swallowed his hefty counter remark. Now it came down to it. “Sundown TV.”

“Sundown? That’d be all right, but I’ve been there. I’m sorry, kid. They kicked me out. Perhaps you can think of something else...”

So that had gone really wrong... Pete had to think quickly. Should he just name any other station?

“Who did you meet at Sundown?” Pete suddenly asked.

“Well, what was his name? I ended up with a Mr Martin. He was the wrong man anyway.”

“You see, and we know Mr Caddy, the top boss.” Pete was beaming. Now it had to work. There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line.

“The top boss? Well, why not?” Taylor said. “Meet me at Ricky’s Bar in half an hour, 201 Chicago Street.”

“Done, Mr Taylor. How will we recognize you?”

“I will be wearing a red-striped baseball cap.”

Pete hung up. Bull’s-eye—in more ways than one.

“red-striped baseball cap? That was the guy you almost ran over, Bob,” said Jupiter.

“The jerk insulted my car,” Bob replied.

“Never mind,” Pete said. “Maybe he can help us.”

The Three Investigators arrived on time. Ricky's Bar was a pretty shabby bar located east of Rocky Beach. They saw Taylor at once. He was sitting at a little table near the entrance having a beer. It was probably not the first one today.

As The Three Investigators got closer, he recognized Bob.

"Aren't you that crazy driver of that old Beetle?"

Bob nodded. "Yes, when we were outside the Sundown TV building... um... we were on our way to an important appointment with Mr Caddy." In a way, that wasn't even a lie, and it didn't miss its effect on Taylor. "We saw you later, by the way, at The Car Zoo."

Taylor gave them a nod to sit down. "The Car Zoo, yeah—that is not exactly my favourite bar. Too expensive, but I had to drown my frustration because they were so arrogant at Sundown."

Jupiter and Bob sat down while Pete went to the bar to fetch three drinks.

"So you need money?" Jupiter asked very directly. "Why?"

Taylor laughed. "What do you mean 'why'? Everybody needs money. You know, I'm an old-timer—too old for rock 'n roll, too young to die. Say, you three boys really want to manage me?"

"Not manage, just mediate... but tell us first," Jupiter asked him. "The Magic Mountains."

Taylor emptied his glass and yelled over to Pete to get him another beer.

When Pete came back with the drinks, Taylor started to say: "I've got a clunker just like yours, boy—an old Ford. I drove it through the mountains... Visited a friend in Silver City... On the way back after ten o'clock, it was already night, but it wasn't really dark. Suddenly a car followed me. I tried to get everything out of my hunk of junk. He raced past me anyway. He stopped... I stopped... A bear got out and took me to a big Indian party. I tell you, it was a real bear. A real bear... with crazy Indians—not many of them... Pretty crazy, the whole thing.

"I had to dance and fight with the bear. But what came next, I don't know. I know absolutely nothing more. It's all gone. And in the morning, I woke up and I was back in my car with a headache. I was dizzy too. Man, it was like I'd been drinking all night."

"But you had not been drinking?" Jupiter asked.

"Of course, I only drive when I'm sober."

Jupiter had his doubts. "And don't you want to find out what happened to you?"

"I want to sell the story, don't you get it? It's ready for prime time!"

"When did this happen, exactly?"

Taylor gave the date. "Slow down, boys, you're still missing the best part... A UFO showed up too—right in the middle of the Indian party... Right out of the sky. It saved me from those lunatics."

## 7. Taylor Backs Out

“UFO? Aliens? Aliens saved you?” Pete had to suppress a laugh.

Taylor was disappointed. “See, you don’t believe me either!”

“You have to admit that it sounds a little unusual,” Bob tried to reason. “Have you noticed anything about the landscape? A rock? Can’t you tell us a little more?”

“So I can read about it in the paper tomorrow? I’ve already talked too much anyway.”

“Mr Taylor...” Jupiter took the floor. “You know all this for a fact, or perhaps you dreamed part of it?”

Taylor winced, then he hit the table with his fist. “Have you been listening? Of course I’ve seen everything! Do you think I’m making this up?”

“No, no,” Jupiter reassured him. “But then I’m sure you can show us exactly where it all happened.”

Taylor laughed. “I sure can—if Mr Caddy comes along, packs a camera and a bunch of guns, and especially if the amount is right. \$110,000, fellas. It’s worth it. A hundred thousand for me and ten for you, if you’ll put me up with Sundown.”

When they were back in the car, Bob took a deep breath. “\$100,000! This guy’s a nut job.”

“\$110,000,” Pete corrected him. “Ten for us.”

Bob dropped the ignition key in shock. “You’re not seriously suggesting that we set up Mr Caddy with Taylor and collect the ten grand?”

“Why not?” Pete asked, as innocently as possible. “Knowing you guys, sooner or later, you would want to go to Magic Mountains to check things out. I’d rather drop the case and take the dough.”

Jupiter got out and folded the seat forward. “Get off Pete! You walk home from here.”

Pete laughed. “Just kidding, fellas. I know we don’t abandon customers. And besides, Caddy would be careful not to pay that kind of money to a guy like that... for such a vague story.”

“Did you even get the money back from Taylor for the beer you got him?” Bob asked.

Pete struck his hand against his forehead. “Oh, damn! I forgot all about that!”

Bob laughed. “You see, he’s up to all the tricks...” He picked up the ignition key, started the car and drove off with a grin.

A short time later, they were back at their headquarters. Of course, Mr Taylor was still the subject of discussion.

“You don’t believe him?” Jupiter wanted to know from Pete.

“It is admittedly difficult for me,” Pete said. “Mrs Sullivan, yes, I find her persuasive. But Taylor? Then there’s the UFO story. It’s just a joke.”

“I could imagine that there is some truth in his claims,” said Jupiter to the astonishment of the other two detectives. “But I think it’s like Mrs Sullivan. He knows most of it only from dream images. But since he wants money for his story, he presents everything as facts. Maybe he’s exaggerating a little and that’s what makes it more interesting. Remember when I

asked him if he was dreaming and he got a little worked up? I guess I hit the mark. There's a logical explanation for all those Indian rituals with the eagle head, the bear man and the UFO for all I care."

"Sounds reasonable," Bob said. "Then Taylor would be a second comparable victim."

"If there might be more that we don't know," Pete said, "if they all survived at all."

Jupiter had not even heard Pete's remark. He had the feeling that he had overlooked something crucial... but he just couldn't figure it out, especially when Pete kept twitching his legs so nervously.

"Stop it, Pete. What's wrong?"

Pete got worked up. "If what they say is true, then even you cannot convince me to go to that valley. We might as well check ourselves into a loony bin!"

"I didn't say we should go there," Jupiter defended himself.

Pete wrinkled his nose. "I know exactly what you're thinking... but look at that Taylor guy! He's done with himself and the world. The same thing's gonna happen to us and we're gonna end up just like him—if we're lucky. If we're unlucky, we won't come back at all. Have you asked Inspector Cotta if any people have gone missing recently? Oh man! And if we ever come back, we'll be talking crazy stuff like those two. Aliens, my foot! Indian curse! We'll have nightmares. No Jupe, I won't be a part of this. I'm not going along with this!"

"Give me a break! I'm sure Taylor didn't just get into such a weird mood after his mountain adventure. He is like that before," Jupe argued. "Only now, he's trying to capitalize on everything. And a minute ago, you didn't really believe his story."

"But you convinced me, Jupe," Pete said. "It doesn't matter anyway. The risk is just too great. I'm out of it!"

Bob had just let this little argument go. Now he saw fit to intervene carefully. "Look at it this way, Pete," he said. "We can don't care about Mr Taylor, but Mrs Sullivan is our client. She has a mystery she wants to solve. We handle all kinds of mysteries and we promised to help her. I think we should start by getting all the facts in order... and then we'll see."

Jupiter took up Bob's suggestion and took out the road map and unfolded it. He pointed to a thin line that marked the route to the Magic Mountains. "Why don't we start with this. Here, this must be this so-called shortcut. First a long, flat, straight stretch, then it's a winding road through the mountains—just like Mrs Sullivan described it."

Bob had also bent over the map. "And that's where Mrs Sullivan woke up," he said with his finger running across the map. "It's just a short distance to the nearest town. Unfortunately we don't have the same information from Mr Taylor."

"But by and large, it must have been the same area," Jupiter suspected. "The time was also about the same."

"What?" Bob asked. "I thought Taylor went there several weeks after Mrs Sullivan."

"That's not what I mean."

"Oh, I see. It was night time for both times."

Jupiter nodded. "Night. It should be pitch dark, but Taylor said it wasn't really dark. It's weird, right? What about Mrs Sullivan?"

"I don't know," Bob said. He got up and went to the window to look out into the dusk. "Of course, a night like that in the mountains away from civilization would have to be darker than in the city with all those lights."

Jupiter stepped beside him. "We should get the historical weather records for that region. Wait..." He rummaged through his trouser pockets. "I wrote down the two dates. Here, the sixth and then a month later the fourth. So it's been a good seven weeks since Mrs Sullivan blacked out. Taylor's trip was three weeks ago."

“Shall I help you out?” Pete suddenly said. “It’s real simple, fellas. During a full moon, it can get pretty bright in the mountains.”

Jupiter spun around. “What are you saying, Pete? Wait a minute... You could be right!” Excited, Jupe jumped to his desk and reached for his pocket diary. He turned the pages. “Really! Pete, you’re a genius. On the sixth, there was a full moon, and a month later, on the fourth, another full moon!”

“Of course it could be a coincidence,” Pete said with played casualness, but secretly he was very proud of his contribution.

“Full moon. Surely it plays an important role in Indian sorcery and ceremonies,” Pete said. “And think of it this way—if there is a connection between the mysterious events and the full moon, the next incident is imminent.”

Jupiter checked the diary again. “... In three days time,” he confirmed Pete’s thoughts, “there will be a full moon again.”

Jupe looked at Bob. “We have to go there. This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance. It’s much better than examining the area in daylight. It’s the only way we’re gonna get close to this eerie phenomenon—if there really is one.”

“I’m in,” Bob said.

Pete pulled a face. “Oh, how I will regret bringing this up,” he murmured. Since he mentioned the full moon, he was in some way partly responsible for this plan. It was just tricky, and somebody had to look after Jupiter and Bob. “But only on one condition,” he said. “I’m not driving there. We’ll go in your yellow shoe box, Bob.”

“Sure, you don’t want anything to happen to your MG!” Bob replied, somewhat offended. “I feel like Worthington already—the chauffeur of The Three Investigators.” But he agreed. Pete’s driving style was too sporty for him anyway.

The Three Investigators used the following two days to gather more details and to prepare for the trip.

Jupiter contacted the man who found Mrs Sullivan. He confirmed the woman’s statements and once again described the helpless state in which he had found her. Bob tried to find out more about Mr Taylor, but little was known. The police had only one record of him—Inspector Cotta could only reveal that much—and it was for drink-driving. So they were still in the dark about him.

They were all the more surprised when Mr Taylor contacted them again. They had just been putting together the equipment for the trip when the phone rang.

Bob switched on the loudspeaker and answered the call. “The Three Investigators. Bob Andrews speaking.”

“This is Taylor. You remember me?”

Bob was caught by surprise. Surely Taylor wanted to get in touch to ask about the promised contact with Mr Caddy. Of course, they had to avoid this subject.

“Oh, Mr Taylor. I’m sorry, I know we were gonna get back to you. But unfortunately we haven’t had a chance to talk to Mr Caddy about your story.”

Taylor curtly interrupted him. “You won’t need to do that anymore. On the contrary, say nothing to anyone. Forget the whole thing. Is that clear? Our conversation never happened!”

“Never happened? But Mr Taylor, we were all there, and the money you promised us...” Of course, The Three Investigators had discussed among themselves that they had no interest in the money. Bob was just trying to find out more about the reason for the sudden change of heart.

“Don’t talk nonsense! What money? I offered you nothing. You’re dreaming, kid. And I’ll tell you one thing—my story isn’t true. They are all lies, you know? It was just a trick to... to make me look important, you understand?”

“Not quite, Mr Taylor.”

“Then make a little effort! Or should I help you?” That last question almost sounded like a threat.

“No need, Mr Taylor,” Bob replied as calmly as he could.

“All right, then. Have a good evening. And tell the other two.” Taylor hung up.

Jupiter and Pete had heard the whole conversation. They looked at each other, stunned.

“He probably found a TV station himself,” Pete surmised.

Jupiter shook his head. “No way. He could have just said that. There’s something else behind it.”

“Maybe he’s threatened,” Bob said.

They could only speculate. So it seemed it was all the more urgent to go to the Magic Mountains themselves to find out the truth.

They gathered the rest of the things they wanted to take with them. After they stacked everything up at Headquarters, they checked them for completeness. Bob sat on the desk with his check list in hand, while Pete checked the items. Jupiter hung lazily in the armchair and watched.

“Flashlights?”

“Yes, three with extra batteries.”

“Sleeping bags?”

“Two regular, one oversized.”

“Oversized? Oh, yes, for our leader, of course... Fingerprint powder?”

“Here.”

“Handcuffs?”

“Yes.”

“Your lock picks?”

“You bet.”

“What are the lock picks for?” asked Jupiter in between, who wanted to get back on Pete for that oversized sleeping bag remark. “Since when are there door locks in the wild?”

“You’ll never know,” Pete replied carefully. He almost always carried the lock picks with him.

Bob went on: “Camera, pocket knife, rope?”

“All here.”

“Plastic bags for evidences?”

“Yes.”

“Breakfast?”

“Chocolate bars, Coke, everything here.”

“Dinner?”

“Chocolate bars, Coke, as well.”

“Emergency rations?”

“Chocolate bars...”

And so it went on. They already felt like professionals. Finally, everything was packed.

They arranged to meet at noon on Saturday. That was enough to reach the turn-off to the Magic Mountains at dusk. They had explained to their parents and guardians that they wanted

to take a little trip to the mountains. Bob's father was fortunately on a business trip to New York. To be on the safe side, Jupiter's aunt Mathilda wrote down the itinerary they had planned. You never know...

## 8. The Nightmare Begins

“We should be there soon!” Jupiter stared excitedly through the windscreen. “Slow down, Bob... I think there’s the turn-off.”

Bob shifted down a gear and let the Beetle roll on. As it was slightly uphill, he immediately lost speed. Bob braked and came to a stop on the hard shoulder of the highway that ran through the bare, bush-covered plateau. There were only a few cars along the way and it had been quite a while since they had passed a town. The last petrol station was also a distance away.

Bob looked through the windscreen. About ten metres ahead of them, a small inconspicuous side road branched off.

“Are you sure that is the right road?” asked Pete, who sat at the back seat of the small car. “Everything is so flat here... and so deserted.”

Jupiter turned around. “Pete, Mrs Sullivan told us that the side road goes across a plain. Only then do the mountains begin. You’ll see that Bob’s Beetle will have enough incline to climb.” He unfolded the map and pointed to a spot on it. “Look, this is where we should be right now.”

Bob turned on the interior lights and looked at the map. At that moment, a car honked behind them. The driver probably saw the parked Beetle too late. Roaring, it went past them, almost touching Bob’s car.

“You’d better turn into the side road,” Pete remarked. “Otherwise, the adventure’s over and you can have your car towed to The Jones Salvage Yard for good.”

Murmuring an answer, Bob started the car again. It rolled on the shoulder and turned into the side road. Now they also saw the words ‘Magic Mountains’ painted on a small green signboard nailed to a post that was not even a metre high.

“There you go,” mumbled Jupiter. “There’s no doubt where we are now.”

In the diffuse evening light, the three boys could see that only a short stretch was tarred. A few metres further on, the bright clay lit up. In the dark surroundings, it formed a dead straight, slowly narrowing track, which finally got lost in the grey horizon.

While Bob drove on, Pete rummaged in his backpack and threw a can of Coke at Jupiter. “Strengthening for what lies ahead... if we have anything to look forward to at all.”

Jupiter opened the can and took a sip. “We don’t even know what to look for. It may well be that we’re just taking a nice harmless trip and turning back onto the highway towards Rocky Beach in the morning hours, exhausted and tired.”

“Wouldn’t even be the worst thing.” Pete pulled the family pack of chocolate bars out of his backpack and ripped them open. “Do you still think we should venture into the mountains? I mean, we can still turn back! No one will blame us.” He took a sip. “Come on, fellas. I have a bad feeling. It’s all so... deserted here. What do you say, Bob?”

Bob was also no longer sure of himself. The darker and lonelier it got, the more clearly the images from Mrs Sullivan’s account rose up in him. He drove the car carefully down the dirt road. He looked in his rear-view mirror and could no longer see the highway.

“After all, there are three of us,” Jupiter explained objectively. “Mrs Sullivan and Mr Taylor were alone.”



“Perhaps the Indian spirit only dares to approach lone travellers,” Pete said hopefully.

“So what are you worried about, Pete?” Jupe said. “There are three of us going through the Magic Mountains. It’s a little spooky, but nice.”

At that moment, the lights of a car appeared behind them. Bob was the first one to notice them. The car approached quickly. Bob slowed down and went as far to the right as he could.

The other car was already close behind them. Bob was already expecting a collision, when the car swerved and passed them with the engine roaring. It threw up a stone that hit the left side of Bob’s Beetle. In the next instance, the tail lights of the dark car had disappeared in a cloud of dust.

“Rascal!” Bob grumbled and brought the car to a complete stop. “He almost forced me off the road!” He grabbed the torch, got out and looked at the damage. His Beetle received a small dent as a souvenir of this trip. Besides the two dents already there, it looked quite handsome.

Was that a warning? Or a reminder not to continue the journey? In the present mood, Bob was receptive to such thoughts. Uncertain, he got back into the car and drove on.

Nothing happened for the next fifteen minutes. The night had come, starlit, but dark and moonless. They had to wait a little longer for the moon’s appearance. Jupiter had checked the moon’s rising time in a moon phase calendar.

The road was now no longer straight. A few wide curves indicated that the landscape was slowly changing. The actual drive through the mountains was soon to come. The trees lining the roadside indicated that too. Bushes had appeared on the arid plain.

The boys had not spoken much. Jupiter even dozed off a little. The monotonous jerking of the Beetle on the gravel road had made him tired. But he was immediately wide awake again when Bob cried out briefly: “Look over there! There’s something there!”

They stared through the darkness. There were blue flashing lights. Also a strong white beam of light became visible. Jupiter immediately switched on the interior lighting and pulled out the map. “There are no houses shown here, let alone a settlement.”

“Maybe an advertisement board or something,” Pete said. Curious, he had bent forward between the seats.

“Advertisement board? Here, in the middle of nowhere?” Jupe said. “The best you can do is to impress a few lonely night owls.”

“Well, Jupe, it was just an idea. But what else could it be? Do you think there’s some nasty surprise waiting for us? An Indian ritual?” Pete swallowed. “Oh, darn! This looks more like the landing of a UFO! See the beams and the blue flickering lights? Let’s turn around.”

“Nonsense! Something must have happened,” Bob said and he slowed down. “I think it’s the police.”

“An accident?” Jupiter asked. “Creepy... here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Maybe it was that speedster from earlier. Serves him right if he gets stopped for speeding.” Bob laughed for a moment, but could not hide his tension. “In any case, we should be careful.”

When they came closer, they saw that it must indeed be a police operation. At least there was a van with two flashing blue lights on it. Across the road, a barrier had been erected. At the side of the road, a police officer was waving a flashing stop sign and slowly approached them.

Bob slowed down and drove on at walking pace. He spotted two other policemen who were positioned near the van on the side of the road. A spotlight installed on the roof of the van illuminated the scene eerily. A fast motorcycle was also parked there. None of this looked like an accident, Bob thought. It was more like a road block.

The policeman held up the stop sign. The Three Investigators were now close enough to recognize the heavy weapon hanging from a strap over the policeman's shoulder. He was also wearing a bullet-proof vest and a helmet that almost completely covered his face. A shiver ran down Bob's back. What was going on here?

When he was level with the policeman, Bob stopped the car and courageously rolled down the side window. The man approached and held his machine gun at bay.

"Go over to my colleagues over there," he ordered and pointed to two other policemen stationed next to the van a short distance away. "Drive slowly! Make no mistake, or it will be your last."

Bob nodded in fright. He was also very annoyed at that last remark by the policeman as he need not impose his authority in that manner. At walking pace, he drove towards the van. Seeking help, he glanced at Jupiter who was looking out of the window, obviously trying to gauge the situation. One of the two policemen was equipped with a machine gun like the earlier one who had stopped them.

The larger of the two, however, did not wear a helmet and held only a gun in his hands. Presumably he was the officer-in-charge. He took a step forward and motioned for Bob to stop, while the other one with the machine gun came up to the driver's side of the car. "Stop the car and get out," he ordered.

Bob stopped the car and he and Jupiter got out. Now they were standing in the middle of the spotlights. Dazzled by the bright beam of light, they closed their eyes for a moment. Pete struggled awkwardly before getting out of the back seat to join his friends.

"What is this?" Jupiter asked. "We are not criminals!"

"Quiet!" The larger policeman barked. "Get over to that van!"

He then ordered The Three Investigators to press their palms on the side of the van and spread their legs apart. One by one, he searched them for weapons. His colleague with the machine gun stood next to him and oversaw the action.

The boys were nervous. Did the police think they were felons? Did they want to arrest them?

"They're clean," the officer-in-charge said to the man with the helmet. Then he turned to Bob. "Let's see some identification, please, and the car keys."

Bob gave him both. Meanwhile, the first policeman with the stop sign approached them. The officer-in-charge threw him the key. "Joe, check out the vehicle!"

"All right, chief." Immediately, Joe went towards Bob's Beetle.

Meanwhile, the officer-in-charge checked Bob's identification. "It's okay." He handed it back to Bob with a cold look.

Bob accepted it and quickly took a glance over to his car, as Joe had begun to search the interior. Bob was trying to see if the policeman could find anything suspicious inside. In fact, they had only taken the bare essentials with them on their trip.

Bob then took a side glance at Jupiter and noticed how laboriously his friend struggled to maintain control. And indeed, it wasn't long before it burst out of him: "Sir! You are treating us like criminals! This is absolutely improper! I'm eager to hear your explanation."

"Routine police check," the policeman said soundlessly.

This answer made Jupiter even angrier. Was he being taken for a fool? "A routine police check? Heavily armed here in the middle of nature? You can't be serious!"

"And what are you teenagers doing in this area?" the policeman yelled back. "Don't tell me you're going to a disco?"

Jupiter was silent. He could not actually offer the policeman a simple and plausible explanation for their journey through the mountains.

“We were late and thought it was a shortcut,” he finally said. He quickly changed the subject. “What kind of uniforms are you wearing?”

“SWAT team,” the man in the helmet stepped in. Then he turned to the officer-in-charge. “Chief, you have to warn them. They’re only kids.”

The chief ignored the remark and took a look at his colleague who had completed the search of the car. Bob had noticed that the policeman had rummaged through the boot and finally even opened the bonnet. Satisfied, he came back across the road to them.

“Find anything, Joe?” The chief asked.

“No, Chief. Nothing but sleeping bags and soda cans. Looks like a trip to the mountains. All clear. We’re on the wrong track with them.”

His boss looked up. “Never mind. Better safe than sorry.”

Then he turned to The Three Investigators. “Okay,” he said with a more conciliatory tone. “All right. I’ll tell you what this is about—at least the essentials, although it’s secret. You know, total press blackout and all. But maybe you should really know about it. We have a manhunt for a dangerous criminal. He robbed a bank in Silver City this afternoon and took a hostage. That is as much I can tell you. It’s possible he escaped through the mountains, but we don’t know for sure. He probably hasn’t got through here yet. We are checking the highway and other roads as well. Maybe he has helpers, but at this moment, we don’t know for sure.”

“In any case, it is dangerous to continue driving here,” the policeman with the helmet interfered. “Under no circumstances should you stop and get out of the car anywhere. If you notice anything suspicious, report it immediately at the next town. Or better yet, turn around and drive back.”

The Three Investigators looked at each other in shock.

The officer-in-charge shook his head. “No, why should they turn around? They are more likely to run into the gangster there than in the mountains. We’ve checked all the vehicles passing here. Actually, the robber couldn’t have gone through here yet, if he even took this route.”

He turned to the three boys. “But my colleague is right about one thing. Don’t stop. No camping in the mountains. Better safe than sorry. Go home, now!”

Bob and Pete already wanted to go back to the car when Jupiter spoke. “Sir?”

“Yeah?”

“Did a black sedan come through here?”

The cop shook his head. “No. Nothing. Did you see one?”

“A car passed us a while back,” said Jupiter. “Just after the turn-off from the highway. But maybe he pulled over somewhere.”

“We’ll be on the lookout, thank you,” the chief said and nodded meaningfully to his colleagues.

Trembling, The Three Investigators went back inside the Beetle. The policeman who searched his car, cleared the road block a bit to the side and waved them through. Bob swallowed and accelerated.

## 9. Jupiter is Uncomfortable

The road was more curvy and steeper up into the mountains. Bob's old Beetle had a lot of work to do. As The Three Investigators drove over a small ridge, they saw that the moon had risen on the other side of the horizon. A clear full moon came right on time, just as it was indicated in Jupiter's moon phase calendar.

It took the three of them a while to get over their encounter with the police. But even as Bob held the steering wheel more calmly in his hands, he clearly felt the fear of the bank robber had almost suppressed the mystery of Ann Sullivan's lost memory. Bob's eyes bored into the night, always ready for the black car to appear.

"He must have turned off somewhere," Jupiter said, as if he could read Bob's mind.

"Who?"

"The black car. Otherwise the police would have checked it out."

"But I didn't notice any turning before the police block, Jupe."

"What if it was just a dirt road? We can't really see that clearly at night," Jupe said.

"Anyway, I suggest we switch and I'll drive. You must be pretty tired."

Bob was pretty tired, but he did not like to give up the wheel of his Beetle. "It's not too bad—maybe in a half hour."

"As you wish," Jupe said. "I'm not really into it either."

In the dim light of the headlights, they saw that the landscape was getting wilder and wilder. That's exactly how Mrs Sullivan had described it to them.

"Welcome to the heart of the Magic Mountains," muttered Bob.

All of a sudden, Pete bent over between the seats. All the time he had been thinking about how he could persuade Jupiter to turn back. Now he thought he had found a way.

"The bank robbery completely overturned our plan," he began cautiously. "The police said there was no way we could stop, let alone get out and search the area. But how are we going to look for clues to the strange events? We'll never find anything." He took a short break. "Actually, we might as well turn back."

"We have already gone too far this way," Jupiter replied. "It makes more sense to continue driving over the mountains. As it is now, this is the shorter way for us to get back to Rocky Beach." He coughed and murmured softly: "Still I understand you, Pete. I, too, feel a little... uncomfortable."

Pete blushed because Jupiter had figured out his intention, but fortunately it was so dark that nobody noticed. On the other hand, if Jupiter was afraid—even though he had described it as 'uncomfortable'—then the chances of stopping their investigations were not so bad.

"I don't know what scares me more," Pete announced, "the Indian's curse, the alien landing or this uncertainty about the bank robber."

Bob laughed sarcastically. "It's quite simple. If we're lucky, the aliens will catch the bank robber, the Indians will turn everyone to stone, and all we have to do tomorrow morning is pick them up and turn them in to the police." When no one laughed, he defiantly added: "Someone has to create a good atmosphere, fellas."

To drive the gloom out, Bob switched on the car radio. But the first radio station he tuned in was broadcasting a discussion on doomsday prophecies, of all things. Bob was about to

resume tuning when they heard a horrible hammering sound. It seemed to come out of nowhere behind them. He turned off the radio and slowed down. And the noise started to grow. What kind of noise was that?

"The UFO!" screamed Pete, who had turned around and looked through the rear window. "In the sky... there's a bright light, and it's coming closer! Bob, drive faster! Come on, man, drive! They're closing in on us!"

"Give me a break," cried Jupe. "A few days ago you were laughing at Mr Taylor for his encounter with aliens!"

"But there, but there..." Pete stuttered.

The noise had become deafening. Bob was so startled that he was struggling to keep his car on track. A bright beam shone on them.

"They're going to get us," Pete cried out in horror. "They're gonna..."

Jupiter took a breath. "It's a helicopter, Pete!" he shouted in between. "That's not a UFO! It's the rattle of the rotor blades!"

For a moment they remained silent.

"It must be the police again," Bob guessed out loud.

He slowed the car down sharply, stopped and jumped out into the road to get a better view. The helicopter circled above them. The spotlights blinded him and he could only see outlines. Jupiter also got out and waved. The police should have realized that they were not the hostage-taker.

Now the helicopter positioned itself directly above the detectives in the night sky. The wind of the rotors blew through their hair. Dust was stirred up. Bob coughed. He got sand in his eyes and couldn't see.

Then a voice resounded through a megaphone. "This is the police. Please continue driving immediately. Do not stop!"

Bob wiped the dirt out of his eyes and got back in the car. Jupiter followed. Bob then drove off quickly. The helicopter accompanied them for a few hundred metres and then they turned off.

"This night is not for the faint-hearted," Pete remarked.

Jupiter cleared his throat. "It is obvious that the police are looking for the bank robber with a helicopter," he tried to explain everything in a logical way. "That doesn't mean anything yet. They have checked every car going through the road block, so why are we getting excited. We're lucky that the police are here. Anyway, now they have disappeared."

Pete bent over between the seats again. He did not seem at all reassured. "Listen to me, fellas. This whole thing stinks. I don't know anything anymore, and I think we'd better forget about our investigation. Forget about Mrs Sullivan and Mr Taylor. We're going back home as fast as we can. Why can't we just go to the disco, or play tennis and drink Coke with our friends like everyone else?"

"Because we are curious and we investigate mysteries of all kinds," replied Jupiter. "Because we want to experience something and are on the right track... Because we want to help other people... And most of all, because we are The Three Investigators..."

"Tonight, we're more like 'The Three Nervous Wrecks'," Bob said. "I respect your attitude, but I think we ought to know when to stop. The mystery cannot be solved tonight. We'll go home and think about it again in four weeks' time at the next full moon."

Jupiter was silent for a moment. "You're right," he surprisingly relented. "It's too dangerous. We're stopping the operation!"

At that moment, Bob stepped on the brakes. Pete, who was still pressed between the front seats, was suddenly thrown forward.

“Ow,” he yelled, “are you crazy, Bob?”

Pete pulled himself up again and threw a glance through the window. Bob’s Beetle had come to a sudden stop. Right in front was a sign that was lit up by the headlights.

It was a detour!

## 10. The Valley of Eagles

“A detour?” cried Pete. “Can’t anything be normal?”

A barrier had been put up across the road. Above it was a diversion sign pointing to a small path leading into the forest. It seemed bumpy, almost impassable. The Three Investigators looked around, but there was no one around.

“Shall I go out and check?” Jupiter asked.

“No,” Pete decided briefly. “You heard what the police said.”

Bob threw a critical glance at the forest road. “I’d like to push the barrier aside and keep going,” he said. “Who knows where this strange detour will lead to?”

Pete immediately objected. “Bob, if we do this, we risk our lives. The police will have their reasons for cordoning off this road. Unless you want to go into the woods, we’d better turn around.”

“As I have said earlier, we have already gone too far out here for that,” remarked Jupiter. “I think we should follow the sign. Why shouldn’t we? The police will know what they are doing.”

But Pete was not satisfied with Juve’s explanation. “You think so, Juve? And why didn’t they tell us about the detour earlier? It all seems very strange to me!”

“I’m sure they have only recently put up the barrier,” replied Jupiter calmly. “Perhaps they are somewhere inside the forest waiting for the gangster. Probably ten sniper rifles are already aimed at us by now. I really say that we continue as indicated. Come on, Pete, get back in the back seat. You want me to drive, Bob?”

Bob shook his head. “I can still go on,” he said. As if to prove it, he put it in first gear and turned the car. “Well, off we go!”

With difficulty, the car bumped along the forest road. It went downhill again. When the moonlight occasionally fell through the trees, they saw that they were heading towards a valley. The slopes rose on both sides, higher on the right than on the left.

“The Valley of Eagles...” Pete said softly. “Mrs Sullivan described a landscape exactly like this. Forest on the left, rocky mountains on the right. Don’t you remember?”

“Yes,” Jupiter said. “But there are many valleys like that.”

“Not here,” Pete insisted. “I tell you—we are going to the exact spot where Mrs Sullivan lost her memory!”

Bob slowed down. “But she didn’t say anything about a detour,” he argued.

“She couldn’t remember!” Pete exclaimed. “It’s entirely possible she was diverted away from the normal road.”

Jupiter shook his head. “Unlikely. That detour has to do with the police.”

“So she came this way voluntarily.” Pete’s voice was again clearly marked by fear.

“Look, Pete. Your only point is that we’re driving through a valley. Nothing we can really get from this, unless you have some proof, like the rock formation she described—the rock that looks like an eagle’s head, illuminated by the moon. If that appeared here, I’d almost be tempted to believe you. As of this moment, am I the only one keeping a cool head around here?”

"I also think we're letting ourselves be too affected by the darkness," Bob said. "But the detour seems strange to me. We should have turned left a long time ago. So we're moving further and further away from the main road."

"This can be deceptive," replied Jupiter. He turned on the interior light and pulled out the map. It took him a while to find the right place. "Well, if this really is the Valley of Eagles, we have a problem. We have taken a long detour. You were quite right, Bob, but eventually and finally, we'll get back on the right road. It's okay."

Jupe looked up slowly, as he felt sick from focussing on the map while the car bumped along.

"Watch out, Bob!"

At once Bob stepped on the brakes. He almost caught a dark shadow scurrying sideways out of the hedges onto the path. The tyres of the Beetle lost their grip and started to slip. With a scratching noise, the car said goodbye to the forest path and landed in the side ditch.

Pete let out a startled cry. Jupiter almost threw himself off the seat, while Bob clawed onto the steering wheel and stared in horror through the windscreen.

A pale face appeared in the light of the headlights, which were now shining diagonally upwards. It was only visible for a tiny moment, before it disappeared immediately.

"A ghost," shrieked Pete. "The Indian spirit! He's coming for us!"

"Nonsense!" Jupiter forcefully pushed open the side door. "Stop being so panicky all the time! There's no ghost, at least not like this one. I think it was a woman! In flesh and blood. She can't get away!"

"You are not allowed to get off here, Jupe," cried Pete, not at all reassured. Horrified, he saw Jupiter get out of the car despite his warning.

"This is different now, Pete!"

The shadow had long disappeared on the other side of the path. Quite a thicket grew there. Jupiter tried to pinpoint the exact spot. With a few steps, he was at a bush and bent it to the side. There was nothing.

"There she is," cried Bob. At the same time, he had also got out of the car to join Jupiter.

Jupiter turned around and stared down the path. From the light of the headlights, they saw a female figure walking towards them. She held her hand in front of her face to protect herself from the glare. Her short stringy hair stuck tangled to her head as if she had run for a long distance. But because of the high-heeled leather shoes and the chic dark pantsuit she wore, she seemed to come from an exclusive party rather than from the wilderness.

Carefully Jupiter backed away until he came next to Bob. Pete seemed to be stuck on the back seat of the Beetle.

The woman came closer. Jupiter estimated her to be in her mid-twenties. When she had approached within a few metres, the woman stepped out of the beam of light and took her hand off her face.

Jupiter could see that she was wearing glasses with a thick black frame. Her lips were made up, and she seemed to smile.

"Hello," she said. Her voice sounded uncertain, strangely dull and monotonous. "Are you from Union Trust? You came to get me, didn't you? I've waited so long..."

Jupiter was so surprised that he was speechless. Bob stuttered something, but Pete brought movement into the situation by getting out. Now he also dared to do so, because he was finally convinced that there was a real person in front of him.

The woman turned and looked at Pete for several seconds. "Who are you? You look great. I trust you. I'm coming to you." Slowly, she walked towards Pete.



Jupiter couldn't believe his ears. "That's enough!" he said. "You show up here like a night ghost, practically out of nowhere, and say incoherent stuff! What's with you?"

"It's not that confusing," muttered Pete.

Jupiter gave Pete an unfriendly look and then continued talking to the woman: "Now please tell me who you are and what you are doing here!"

Astonished, the woman turned around. "I am... Debby," she stuttered. "Yes, after all... I must be Debby. Who else could I be? Where am I?"

"In the Magic Mountains, of course," Jupiter told her and was about to start bursting out again when Bob held him back.

"Do you have a headache?" he asked Debby.

She nodded. "Yes, very... That's weird. How did you know?" Still she spoke as if she was in a trance.

"And can you remember what happened?" Bob asked cautiously. "... In the last few hours?"

"I don't know."

"Where do you live?"

"I think in Silver City," Debby said. "Yeah, I'm from Silver City. I guess I was supposed to be picked up by Union Trust. But then I... I drove myself."

"You drove yourself? Here? By yourself?"

"Yes. My car is over there. Further down." She pointed with her arm into the darkness. "I don't think it's moving."

Jupiter cleared his throat and looked at Bob. Possibly Bob had found the explanation for the woman's condition. What she said actually sounded like she was another victim of those mysterious incidents in the mountains.

"Let's go to her car and take a look," Jupiter decided.

"We have to walk, Juve," Bob said and laughed bitterly. "We can't get my car out that quickly. but I'd like to try."

He started the car, put in on reverse and slowly accelerated. The tyres were going crazy, the Beetle was shaking but didn't move from the spot.

"I think you have to push!" cried Bob.

Juve and Pete braced themselves against the bonnet and pushed with full force, but nothing could be done. Disappointed Bob switched off the engine.

"Someone must pull us out," he said to Jupiter, who straightened up and rubbed his hands clean against his trousers. Bob got out and folded the seat forward to take out two backpacks from the back seat. As Debby had meanwhile hooked herself to Pete's arm, Bob and Jupiter shouldered the backpacks.

"How far do we have to go?" Bob wanted to know.

Without turning around, Debby shouted: "Not far."

Jupiter and Bob let themselves fall behind a bit so they could exchange a few words undisturbed.

"You suspect that she is a victim?" Jupiter asked quietly. "Like Mrs Sullivan and Mr Taylor?"

"Sure thing," Bob whispered. "The signs are right. Full moon, this area here, the headache, this strange impression the woman is making... She doesn't seem quite herself, but shreds of her memory are emerging."

"If you are right, then we are very close to the mystery! The spell is working tonight!"

"It's almost comforting to know that you feel the same way, Juve. Something's lurking here. All I'm thinking about is getting out of here as fast as I can, honestly. Maybe at least

Debby's car is still in good shape." Bob did not give up hope. "Then we'll just get in her car and take her to the next town."

"She looks familiar somehow, this woman," Jupiter said. "If I only knew where I've seen her before."

The path made a bend and the further they walked, the more the trees seemed to push to the side. Slowly they got a view of the rocky ridges. Cold and colourless, they stood out in the full moonlight. It was so bright that they could turn off the flashlight.

"A spooky place," Bob whispered.

Then they saw Pete stop abruptly. They heard him yell out in fright.

## 11. Under the Eagle's Head

Jupiter and Bob were almost scared to death. They immediately ran to Pete.

"What happened?" Bob asked.

"Look," he said, pointing up into the mountains. Jupiter and Bob followed his lead.

The moon shone on a rock that once again stood out clearly from the jagged mountain ridge. It shone silver and cool. But that was not what made The Three Investigators flinch. It was its shape—unmistakably that of a large eagle's head.

"The curse of the Indians," muttered Pete.

"What are you talking about?" Debby asked in between. "There's nothing. Why don't you go on?" She seemed to be slowly regaining her strength.

"The rock," Pete replied evasively. "It's creepy."

"It's rather scary where my car has gone," was Debby's response. "And how I got here. Why don't you just leave that stupid rock and come on. Let's find my car and get out of here."

"I'd love nothing more, but where to?" asked Jupiter, hoping to learn more about Debby, but it was in vain.

"Anywhere. Preferably to the nearest town to see a doctor," Debby said. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

Jupiter tried another way to know more about this woman. "Have you looked in your trouser pockets?" he asked and stepped up to her. "Do you still have your car keys? Any ID? A credit card? Anything personal?"

Frightened, she retreated. "Don't touch me!"

"Okay! I just thought there must be some clues to help us understand what happened to you." Jupiter shrugged his shoulders and flinched.

Debby looked at him for a moment, then she started emptying her pockets. The first thing she dug out was a key with a tag on which was a number. Astonished, she turned the key in her hand. "I don't know what this is," she murmured and passed it to Pete.

The Second Investigator checked the key out. "Looks like a security key," he said. "'667'—that could be for a locker or a safe deposit box." He gave Jupiter a meaningful look. "Like you would find in a bank, for example."

"I don't know." Debby kept digging in her pockets and found a lipstick and handkerchief. "That's all I have on me."

"But where are your ID, your money and the car key?" Jupiter said. "It can't be that you don't have anything with you."

Debby looked at Jupiter again. "My bag is missing. Yes, I had a bag with me!"

"What did it look like?" Jupiter wanted to know.

"Shoulder bag, shiny grey."

"Maybe it's in the car?" Pete said, slowly getting ready to leave as the rock gave him the creeps. "Let's go and look."

Debby nodded and hooked her arm to Pete again. "You're right," she said. "Let's go find my car."

They didn't have to walk far. Around the next bend, Debby stopped. "There it is," she shouted.

The car was about fifty metres away and was not recognizable at first sight because of its colour. It stood out only slightly against the dark background. Seemingly carelessly, the car was parked at an angle on the side of the road and left there as if everything had happened in a hurry. They saw that not even the lights had been turned off. Weakly red, the rear lights shone towards them like two cat's eyes.

Jupiter took a look at the surroundings. On the left, there was a dark wooded slope, while on the right, the mountains rose up only after a stony plain.

"It could be a trap," hissed Jupiter. He felt uncomfortable. Someone could be lurking over there.

Debby walked on and The Three Investigators carefully followed behind. Suddenly, she turned around, annoyed. "Why are you so slow? Don't you want to help me check my car?"

Now The Three Investigators noticed that the interior lighting of the car flickered very faintly. There didn't seem to be anyone inside.

"Are you sure this is your car, Debby?" Pete asked.

Debby nodded. "It must be mine! I was in it when I woke up. Maybe I hit a rock and banged my head on the steering wheel. Maybe I was unconscious... I don't know."

"You don't seem to have a head injury, Debby," Jupiter noticed and reached out to wipe the hair from her forehead. "And your glasses are still intact."

"I said don't touch me!" she exclaimed.

"Okay, okay!" Jupiter grinned uncertainly.

"And you really drove alone?" Bob kept drilling. The situation also made him more and more nervous.

"Yes, of course, why do you ask? When I woke up, I was alone." She faltered. "Listen! If you don't believe me, then I don't need your help! Get lost! Get out of here!"

Pete grabbed her arm reassuringly. She let him. As carefully as possible, he said: "Well, you have to understand us. It just sounds strange that you don't remember exactly how you got here, yet you're so sure it's your car."

Quieter than just now, she replied: "But how else would I suddenly appear in this landscape? It's not as if I was beamed down here. I'm sorry! I can't tell you anymore. I'd like to know myself!" She grabbed her head. "Oh, the pain."

"Maybe we'll split up," Jupiter suggested. "And approach from different sides."

"Why?" asked Debby.

"This area is not very inviting," Jupiter said evasively. "Once a dangerous Indian tribe lived here, and they were known to be hostile towards outsiders."

"Oh really? That must have been a long time ago. I didn't see anybody..."

"Try to remember," Jupiter kept insisting. "Do you recall anyone appearing before you, for example, an Indian?"

"No! Nothing!" she burst out. "What's this Indian business? It's bad enough as it is!"

Bob looked around. Another thought had long since occurred to him that could not be driven out of his head. The car bore a striking resemblance to the car that had sped past them earlier. Perhaps the bank robber had got through the police road block. But what role did Debby play then? Had she been in the car with the robber?

Then Bob pulled Jupiter closer to him. "Didn't the police say that the bank robber had a hostage?" he whispered so softly that only Jupiter could hear him.

"I had thought about that," the First Investigator hissed back. "Debby may indeed have been his hostage."

“But then why can’t she remember anything? It’s more like what Mrs Sullivan and Mr Taylor experienced...”

“There are several possibilities,” Jupiter thought. “Debby could still be under the mysterious spell. The two stories overlap. Maybe the robber was also affected and he is here in a similar condition... or there is no other driver. She was driving alone, passed us earlier and we just mistakenly associated the car with the bank robber. Debby then drove into the detour as well and now somehow this spell has hit her... or she’s fooling us. Maybe she’s even an accomplice to the bank robber, but even that doesn’t make sense, does it?”

“I don’t think so,” Bob said. “But whoever was at the wheel, why did he just stop here? Maybe it was the haunting.”

“We need to examine the car. There we will find clues leading in one direction or the other. But we must be very careful. It is possible that this robber is roaming around here, and we must also be careful of the so-called spook...” He pointed to the still shining rock head.

“I guess you don’t believe in that kind of stuff.”

“No, of course not. You know I don’t believe in evil spirits or magic potions. There must be a logical explanation, but it’s still dangerous. How dangerous? We saw it from Mrs Sullivan. After all, we haven’t had the slightest explanation for her experience.”

Debby, who had been talking to Pete, turned around. “What is there to discuss? Why don’t you two hurry up?”

“We’re coming,” Jupiter replied.

## 12. Detective Work

They did not separate, but approached the vehicle very carefully, which was almost across the forest road. The engine was switched off. Jupiter pulled the air through his nose. It smelled of petrol, even if only slightly. The First Investigator registered it and decided to investigate later. First he had to get an overview of the situation.

“I’m sure this is the car that passed us earlier,” Bob whispered. “This shape of tail lights—that’s not often you see in this model of the car.”

“Yes, a rare model... and expensive too.” Jupiter turned to Debby, who was standing close to Pete. Jupiter looked at them with displeasure. He wondered what that woman had got on Pete. “Debby? Wouldn’t you rather sit back there on the rock and rest? We’ll check out the car.”

“But I need to know what happened to me. I’m as curious as you are.”

“Hmm,” Jupe mumbled. Actually, she was right.

Jupiter walked attentively around the car. He noticed that the driver’s door was not quite closed. The interior light was dimly lit. There was no one in the car. Whoever had been in it had left, possibly in a hurry. But why was the car parked here? Was it involved in an accident?

Jupiter turned on his flashlight and bent down to look under the car. “Everything’s fine here. It couldn’t have been a rock that interrupted Debby’s ride. There was no collision.” He got up again and put his hand on the bonnet of the car. “Pretty warm,” he said. “It can’t have been here long.”

“I told you so,” cried Debby. “Why don’t you believe me?”

Bob had joined Jupiter in the meantime. With a scrutinizing look at Debby, who both detectives are sceptical about, he muttered: “Do you really think Debby drove the car here?”

“Perhaps we will soon find the answer,” replied Jupiter. “I have come across something that might help us in this matter. We are going to put the puzzle together.”

“As long as we are not threatened with a nasty surprise,” Bob said with a side glance into the dark surroundings.

“Pete is keeping watch,” Jupiter reassured him, even though he guessed that the Second Investigator was more concerned with Debby than with the surroundings.

But at that moment, Debby let go of Pete. She rubbed her wrists as if they were hurting and walked strangely and awkwardly towards the car. Then she tried to reach for the door.

“Stop!” cried Jupiter.

Debby looked at him in astonishment. “Surely I am allowed to sit in my own car!”

Jupiter shook his head. “Not until we have examined it for all traces. Debby, that’s in your best interest. How else are we gonna find out your problem?”

Debby went back to Pete and sulked. There was a second reason why Jupiter wanted to keep the woman at a distance. As long as he wasn’t sure which side Debby was on, he wanted to be able to exchange a few words with Bob without her near them.

“It is as if everything had happened in a great hurry,” Jupe said. “Look, Bob, the car key’s not in the ignition.”

“Debby didn’t have her car key with her as well,” Bob said. “Maybe she threw it away. We should check the area later.”

Carefully, as if a nasty surprise was waiting for him, Jupiter opened the door and leaned in. The car had dark leather seats, which did not look very well maintained.

“Wait, there’s something on the passenger seat…” Jupiter grabbed the item. “A key without a tag,” he said in surprise. He pulled his head out of the car and held up his find.

“Debby, do you know what key this is?” Juve went over to Debby and showed her the item.

“What? No, I don’t know.”

“Doesn’t this belong to you?”

“I don’t know! You’re asking too many questions!”

“Okay, Debby,” he said solemnly. “Can you show me the key that you have with you earlier.”

“Yes, why?” she replied reluctantly, stood up, and rummaged through her pockets. She handed Jupiter what he had requested.

The First Investigator held both keys examining them in the light of Bob’s flashlight.

“Hey, Pete, look!” he said, smiling as he handed the two keys to Pete. “What do you make of these two keys?”

Pete was the lock-picking expert for The Three Investigators and he knew quite a big deal when it came to keys and locks.

“Clearly, the bows are identical, and the blades are of the same structure. However, the cuts are different,” Pete marvelled. “These are safe deposit box keys. For security reasons, to open a safe deposit box, you need two keys—one for the customer, and one for the bank. I think the one with the tag is the customer key, whereas, this other one without the tag could be the bank’s key.”

“So Debby, do you have a lot of money or valuables?” Jupiter boldly asked.

“No,” she said. “I don’t think so. But I don’t know why that concerns you!”

Jupiter muttered something to himself. Debby really wasn’t being helpful to him, on the contrary, she was almost impudent.

Juve and Bob went back into the car and continued to look around. Somehow, Juve felt that this car didn’t fit Debby. It was an old, expensive car that was clearly heading for its demise. Debby’s well-groomed clothes were clearly in contrast to all the dirt in here.

Juve got into the driver’s seat. With his right foot he felt for the accelerator pedal.

“How exactly did this happen when you arrived here, Debby? Please try to remember. I certainly don’t want to annoy you. I just want to find out the truth.”

Debby stepped up. “I… all I remember was, I was suddenly back in the car. Something must have happened. I guess I jumped out, I ran and I fell. But I can’t tell you exactly, it’s very strange. This headache…”

Jupiter got out and waved Debby over. “Come here!” Surprised, she went to Jupiter. “Get in the car, please.”

“What?”

“Yes, you heard right. Get in the driver’s seat, please.”

“I think I should not.”

“Yes, please.” Jupiter stepped aside.

Uncertain, Debby pushed past him and got behind the wheel. “Now what?”

A telling grin appeared on Jupiter’s face. “However you got here, you didn’t drive here yourself.”

Debby audibly inhaled the air. “Why?”

“Step on the brake pedal, please.”

Debby tried, but she had to stretch her foot almost straight to touch the pedal.

“Debby, you weren’t at the wheel. It must have been a much bigger person. You can barely reach the brakes.”

Debby nodded. “Maybe I pushed the seat back,” she said. “I just don’t remember.”

Jupiter shook his head. “That is not very likely. The way we found the car, everything indicates that it was abandoned in a hurry. The position of the seat is unimportant. Why would you push it back?” Then Jupiter put her to the test. “In the first place, do you even know how to push the seat back?”

Debby rolled her eyes and bent forward to look for a lever under the seat. But she reached into a void.

Jupiter expected exactly that. “This is a power seat,” he explained. “It is moved not mechanically but by electric motors. You can only do so when the engine is running. By the way, you’ll find the power switch on the left side of the seat.”

Debby looked at him with a ghostly look. “But then how did I...?”

“... Get here?” said Jupiter. “I do not know yet... but we’ll find out. In any case, someone else must have been driving the car. So we’re not alone here. Come on, Pete and Bob, let’s take a closer look. There must be some clues. Debby, you stand out here and make sure that we don’t get any nasty surprises.”

Debby wanted to protest, but then got out of the car to make way for the detectives.

Bob opened the passenger door and examined the glove compartment. It was empty. Pete took care of the storage compartments in the side doors. He had no luck either.

“It’s as if someone has deliberately emptied everything,” Pete said, “to remove every trace.”

“Are you guys... police or something?” Debby’s astonishment was obvious—perhaps from observing the thoroughness The Three Investigators worked to get clues.

Pete couldn’t help laughing. “We’re certainly not the police. I don’t think that there are such young policemen.”

Bob knelt down next to the car to light up under the seats. It was a direct hit. “Aha! Here’s something here! Darn, I can’t reach it. Debby, could you give me a hand. You have thinner hands.”

Debby crouched down beside him and reached under the driver’s seat. She retrieved a folded sheet of paper, which Bob immediately took from her.

“Interesting,” he muttered. “A plan. A street, a building with several entrances. What could that be? Debby, do you have any idea?”

“No,” she said. “I can’t remember.”

“Of course not,” mumbled Jupiter, slightly annoyed. He took the paper from Bob’s hand and studied it. “There’s an arrow marked here and labelled with the numbers ‘667’!”

Bob’s hand trembled with excitement. “The number on Debby’s key tag is also ‘667’. Then that must be it—this floor plan must be for a bank!”

Jupe took the flashlight from Bob and shone the light from below against the paper and a watermark was visible. “Indeed... Union Trust,” read Jupiter, “which you mentioned earlier, Debby. Union Trust was supposed to pick you up.”

Debby nodded. “Union Trust, yes. My uncle works there. At the bank... Now I remember... His driver was supposed to pick me up... and take me to the bank.”

“This floor plan is obviously for the customer vaults of the Union Trust Bank.” Jupiter tapped the paper vigorously. “Right where the arrow is pointing should be the safe deposit box number 667.”



“So as I can see, the two keys come right into play here,” Bob remarked. “Debby has one key, and the bank robber had the other—which was probably stolen from the bank!”

“The bank robber?” exclaimed Debby in horror. “What bank robber?”

Bob turned to Debby. “Yes,” he said calmly. “We suspect that you have been the victim of a bank robbery. This may be the reason for your memory loss. I’ve read about it. When something terrible happens to you, the brain can trigger a protective reaction—it simply blocks out the event. There is a loss of memory. Over time, depending on the severity of the event, the memory comes back. It’s amnesia.”

“Psychogenic amnesia,” Jupiter added. “Your brain can’t handle what’s happening and pushes it away.”

“And you think that happened to me?” Debby asked.

Bob nodded. “The thing is, you can’t remember the last few hours,” he continued. “So this could be your safe deposit box, Debby. Something valuable must be in it and the robber wanted it. When he got it, he made his escape and took you hostage.”

“It could have been like that,” said Jupiter. He thought of Debby’s uncle. “Or the culprit could even work at the bank. Debby, don’t you remember what you are supposed to do at the bank?”

Debby thought deeply but was silent.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob exchanged meaningful looks. They were all thinking the same thing. The floor plan had to have something to do with the robbery, and The Three Investigators was standing in front of the bank robber’s car. Was Debby his accomplice? ... Or did the robber take her as a hostage to ensure his escape? Probably the robbery had not gone off exactly as the bank robber had planned. But Debby couldn’t or wouldn’t help them with these questions.

“Keep looking,” Jupiter decided. “What about the boot?”

“I already checked that,” Bob said. “It’s locked. But we should keep an eye on the surroundings, although I don’t think the bank robber is anywhere near here. I think he fled.”

Debby looked bewildered. “Everything is so confusing. And there’s the headache,” she said. Then she rubbed her wrists.

Suddenly Bob said: “Show me your hands.”

In surprise, Debby pulled her sleeves back a little. Bob turned on the flashlight. “Scraped! That’s why you keep rubbing your wrists.”

“But why are my wrists scraped?”

“You were tied up—with a rope or something,” Bob suspected.

At that moment, Pete called out. He climbed out of the car and swung two rope ends. “These have been cut, Debby. Bob’s right. You were tied up. Either you were able to free yourself or the perpetrator did it to let you go. I found this in the gap between the seats in the back seat.”

Debby shook her head. “I just can’t believe it,” she said. “What you’re telling me is a crazy story!”

“Debby, you’re distraught and wandering around the woods all alone,” Jupiter said. “We find an abandoned car, a note that points to the Union Trust Bank, and two rope ends that match the abrasions on your wrist. And we also have information that a SWAT team is looking for a bank robber. If you have a better explanation of how these puzzle pieces fit together, I’d love to hear it.”

Of course Debby had to pass. “But I must remember something,” she said.

Bob wondered if he should tell her about Mrs Sullivan and Mr Taylor, but he decided not to in case it confused her further.

"She's been through terrible things," Pete interjected. "Now leave her alone. Does it matter whether it was a treasure trove of gold or a suitcase full of dollars?" He turned around. "Come on, let's keep looking. Maybe we'll find other clues."

"Gold," Debby said, rubbing his head.

"Gold?" Jupiter held Pete back.

"It has to do with the gold," Debby muttered. "Yes, I was sent to get the Mask of Gold... the treasure of an ancient Indian tribe. That's it. Somehow the mask was to be taken away... I don't know... I was going to get it. It was in the safe deposit box... It's gold. It's an old, but very valuable piece."

"A mask of the Accipi Indians?" Bob asked hastily.

Debby grabbed his neck and swallowed. "Accipi, what makes you say that?"

"They lived in this region," Pete said. "It was obvious to name them."

"Accipi, yes, I think it was them!" Debby looked up. "Gee, you guys are really good! It's starting to come back to me."

"And you own such a valuable mask?" Bob went into it astonished.

"I don't know. I find it terribly tiring to remember." She sat down on the rock again, visibly exhausted.

The Three Investigators exchanged meaningful looks. When Debby was out of earshot, Bob remarked: "I think we're into a serious theft case... when we are supposed to be working for Mrs Sullivan."

"We investigate anything," Pete soberly noted. "How do we proceed?"

"The boot!" Jupiter was now on fire. "We have to see what's in it, even if it's locked."

Pete moaned. "A car boot doesn't crack so easily, at least not with my lock picks. It can take me a couple of hours."

"We can try the back seat," Bob suggested.

All three of them proceeded to work on taking out the back seat. Debby was standing watch outside, but she was rather busy watching The Three Investigators and making clever comments.

It was not easy to remove the back seat. But finally they did it. Pete shone a light into the boot. "Empty," he said in disappointment.

"Were you hoping to find something?" Jupiter asked.

"Were you not?" Pete asked him back.

"Yes," Jupiter had to admit. "Although it was highly unlikely. The robber took the loot with him, of course, and he didn't leave anything behind... such as his tools, gloves, or a disguise."

"Wait a minute," Pete said, shining into a corner. "There's something else here." He stretched, reached inside, and pulled out a thick white cloth. "Eww, this stinks! It makes you sick!"

"Don't breathe in," cried Jupiter. "The rag should be soaked with an anaesthetic! That's why Debby doesn't remember anything. The robber put her out of action." They proudly presented their find.

Debby was terrified, but she also seemed relieved that The Three Investigators had found a logical reason for her memory gap.

"The Indian spook is out of the picture," Bob said softly. "At least for Debby."

"But we're not out of here yet," Jupiter added.

### 13. Seven Wooden Poles

There was one thing about the new findings—Jupiter's doubts about Debby had shrunk to a minimum.

Of course there were still some unanswered questions. For example, why had her glasses stayed intact when Debby had been kidnapped and tied up. And why had the thief taken Debby in the first place? Also, Debby's memory loss seemed to him to be inconsistent. But there would probably be simple explanations for this and so Jupiter kept his doubts to himself, especially since The Three Investigators were quite proud of how quickly they had deciphered the secret about the car and about Debby.

But what was not clear was why the robber had stopped here, of all places. Then Jupiter remembered the slight smell of petrol. He knelt down next to the back of the car where he thought the tank was, and searched with the flashlight for confirmation of his suspicion. Indeed... the petrol sump was scratched open. The robber must have driven over a rock and damaged the undercarriage. Slowly the petrol had leaked and here, near the Eagle Rock of all places, the last drop had flowed out. Then the perpetrator had freed the still dazed Debby from her restraints so that she could save herself. Then, he had taken flight on foot... or so it seemed. But what was to be done now? They were undecided.

Bob took the floor. He thought of his Beetle, which was left abandoned in a ditch a distance away. "Go back to my car," he said.

"And what would we do there?" Debby wanted to know. "Wait for a miracle?"

"Hanging around here doesn't help either," Bob was indignant at the somewhat sharp reaction.

Debby laughed. "Now you were so smart as you figured it all out, but now this... We need help. I tell you, we'll take the shortest way back to the main road... which leads across this mountain." She had seen Jupiter's map and suddenly seemed very determined. Jupiter wondered if it was because she now knew how dangerous it was out here.

Pete still had some reservations. "What if we get in the way of the robber?"

Jupiter shook his head. "That is a possibility, but not the most likely one. The culprit will be long gone by now. And he has taken the loot with him. What's to keep him here?" For once, he took Debby's side.

"Both cars don't work," he added. "Judging from the map, if we walk back the way we came, it's no use as we are a long way from the police block, let alone the junction to the highway... Anyway, I don't like this place, so I agree with Debby. The shortest route is forward across the mountain and on to the main road. We'll take that and go to the police." The other two detectives agreed. It's the best they could come up with.

On the map, they saw that there was indeed a small hiking trail leading out from the Valley of Eagles. Jupiter groaned as they went uphill. He couldn't put up with such efforts easily. His muscles were sore all over, and he was far from being well-trained. But he didn't complain. After all, he had suggested this way. They also got out of the sight of the eagle's head, which seemed to look down on them from the other side of the valley.

After a while, it became flatter and they came to a plateau. At one point, they argued about the direction they should take but Debby convinced them to follow the path and not go

straight through the thicket.

Suddenly the forest stopped and they entered a clearing. The moon shone brightly down from the cloudless sky and bathed the clearing in a colourless light—but there they encountered a big surprise. In the middle of the clearing were seven long poles stuck vertically on the ground. They were arranged in a circle. Their upper ends were pointed, as if something could be pierced on them.

“Indians!” Pete exclaimed. He had focused so much on the story of the bank robber that he had completely repressed the Accipi legends. Now fear was written all the more clearly on his face.

Debby, on the other hand, kept cool. “What Indians? Are you gonna start that again?”

“Indians used to live here,” explained Jupiter. “I’ve already told you.”

“Ah, yes.” Debby seemed pretty uninterested.

Jupiter was right. He looked around. Everything seemed completely abandoned.

“What are those dark spots over there between the poles?” Jupiter wondered.

Pete and Bob also saw it. Did this place have something to do with Ann Sullivan’s experiences? They crept up and Jupiter bent down to check the ground. He picked something up and smelled it.

“It’s a fire place,” he said. “Ashes and charred wood. But none of this is a hundred years old for sure—more like a couple of weeks. I think we’re about to solve Mrs Sullivan’s mystery, fellas.”

“I don’t understand it,” said Debby, who had reluctantly stopped. “Mrs who? ... Come on, let’s go on. We haven’t got time and I’m not feeling too well.” She suddenly seemed to be in a great hurry.

“No!” Now Jupiter was on a hot streak. “Bob, Pete, search the ground carefully. Debby, make sure that no one surprises us.”

Since his tone of voice could not tolerate any argument, she sighed but obeyed. Bob and Pete lit up the area. Before long, Bob had found what he was looking for. He proudly held up a small wooden figure. “The eagle’s head,” he said.

Jupiter and Pete jumped in and Debby also came to see the find.

“Listen, what’s going on? Are you keeping secrets from me? What’s all this fuss about an eagle’s head?” Her voice suddenly sounded fragile and uncertain. She stuttered a bit, retreated a metre back without waiting for an answer and finally left the three of them alone. The Three Investigators noticed her reaction in surprise, but did not worry about it. What intrigued them more was that they had come a decisive step closer to the story of Mrs Sullivan.

“It must have been here,” said Jupiter. “She didn’t just dream it! But what she experienced still determines her dreams today. Maybe there really are drugs involved, Pete.”

“I’m sure we’ll find more clues,” Bob said excitedly. “I think we’re in for a lucky break. First we get on the trail of the bank robber, and now we are at this mysterious Indian ritual ground.”

Pete’s eyes searched the edge of the forest. “Everything here is lonely and deserted. Fellas, we can take our time and relax.”

At that moment, they heard a bang. It came from the other side of the clearing right out of the woods. Quickly Pete threw himself on the ground. It sounded like a gunshot. Bob and Jupiter did the same. Shivering they waited. As nothing happened for a while, they raised their heads over the grass and looked around carefully.

“There, a light,” Jupiter suddenly said. “But it’s far away, over there, on the other hillside.”

Bob also saw it. "I wonder if there are people there."

"That would be amazing, but anything is possible. Maybe we can get help. But the shot did not come from that direction, but somewhere much closer. I think we should approach this with caution." They crouched down and moved forward.

"Hey, wait for me!" Suddenly Debby had reappeared and was running after them. In the excitement, they had forgotten all about her. "Don't leave me alone!" she cried.

"Bend down," Jupiter told Debby. "You make an excellent target."

They crawled on until they went back into the forest. There they stood up. A short distance away, something flat glowed in the moonlight. When they had made their way through the undergrowth, they saw that it was the top of a large Indian teepee. It was made of wood. On the side facing them was painted an eagle's head. Inside, light was burning, coming out faintly through the cracks.

"Who could that be?" Bob asked. "The bank robber?"

The Three Investigators stayed under cover. For a few seconds, nothing happened.

Suddenly a door opened on the side. A man stepped outside. He was wearing jeans and a dark jacket. He let the door fall back into the frame, which gave a loud bang.

"So that is it," muttered Jupiter with relief. "Nobody fired a shot. It was just the door."

The man muttered something and disappeared into the bushes. Apparently, he had to pee.

"Debby, do you recognize that man?" Jupiter asked quietly. "Is this the robber?"

But Debby proved to be a bad help once again. "I don't know, Jupiter."

The First Investigator acted on short notice. "I'm going to check it out," he hissed. "Very quickly. There should be enough time. I'll get the mask if it's there. Wait here and warn me if he comes back."

He bent a few branches to one side and sprinted off. Everything happened so fast that Bob and Pete hadn't had a chance to react or put a word in.

## 14. Double-Crossed!

Before they could count to three, Jupiter had opened the door of the wooden teepee and crept in. Despite his corpulence, the First Investigator was surprisingly agile when it mattered.

Bob and Pete saw Jupiter carefully closing the door. He hardly made a sound.

Not Bob or Pete, but Debby was the first to find her voice. "What was this idea of Jupiter," she hissed. "Are you going to leave him there alone? Go after him! What if the man comes back?"

"Are you crazy?" Bob shook his head. "The risk is far too great! All he has to do is lock the door. Then we'll be really trapped!"

Debby's mouth moved, but no words came out.

"Why doesn't Jupe come out," Pete asked restlessly.

Bob was scared himself, but any rash actions wouldn't help here. "He's only been gone a few seconds. What's he gonna find there?"

But it was already too late. They heard branches crack. The man was coming back. Pete flinched and wanted to sound out the Red-bellied Flycatcher bird call that The Three Investigators had used as an inconspicuous warning signal between themselves. The signal had helped them many times before, but this time, it was too late. The man was simply too fast. He walked up to the teepee, opened the door and got in. Then they heard his astonished exclamation, just as the door slammed shut with a bang.

"We must help Jupe," Bob shouted regardless of the volume.

Unnoticed by the two detectives, Debby had already sneaked near the teepee. Bob and Pete wanted to rush forward but Debby had already opened the door and went in. A couple of seconds later, she came back out with a gun in her hand!

"Great, Debby, keep that guy in check. We're coming!" Pete yelled and stumbled on a root, and hit the ground lengthwise.

Bob, who was just behind him, stopped. "Take it easy, buddy," he said and bent over to him. "Debby has the situation well in hand. She's great!"

Pete nodded and rubbed his hurt knee.

"Yes! I got you covered, you two snoops!" It was Debby. Her voice suddenly sounded very sharp. Bob looked up. He was horrified to see that she was pointing the gun at them.

"What are you doing?" he stuttered.

Pete also pulled himself up. "Debby—"

"Freeze!" barked the woman. "Otherwise I'm afraid I'll have to use this gun!"

"What's wrong now?" whispered Pete. "She... she is the accomplice of the robber! All this time she has been playing a game with us. Headaches and memory loss, my foot!"

"That's all nonsense," Bob whispered back. He was trying to sort out the chaos in his head. "Don't let her catch us too. The best thing is to run."

"Just how?" Pete wondered, hoping that an opportunity should arise in a moment.

Debby waved the gun. "Well, come on over! Your friend is already properly wrapped! And I'm looking forward to seeing you tied up too." She laughed. "Especially you, Pete."

Then they heard a low rumble in the sky. It grew louder quickly. "The police helicopter," cried Pete as he looked up. "Rescue is on the way!"

Debby also looked up. Bob took advantage of this moment. With a powerful jerk, he dragged Pete into the forest. "Follow me!"

He crawled away, not directly backwards, but to the side. He had spotted some bushes that would give them good cover. Besides, it was always wise to go against expectation.

By now, Debby had noticed that the two detectives had disappeared. With cautious steps, she walked toward the spot where she had last seen them, with the gun ready. But the further she advanced, the more hesitant her movements became, as if she expected Bob and Pete to rush towards her at any moment.

The noise of the rotors drowned out every sound so the two boys could move quickly. They hid behind a boulder in the woods between the teepee and the clearing with the wooden poles. Then they realized that the helicopter pilot had chosen the clearing as his landing site.

Bob wondered how they could have been so lucky to have the police show up at such an appropriate time, but in the end he didn't care. The main thing was that help was near. Now they would be able to watch in peace as the police overpowered the two bank robbers and freed Jupiter.

Pete was already getting ready to run out of hiding when suddenly something made him cautious. He could see that Debby had by no means panicked and run away—on the contrary. She abandoned her search for Pete and Bob, ran back to the teepee and shouted something to the man. Then she ran straight into the clearing. Pete and Bob had to bend down lower just as she rushed past them.

Through the undergrowth, the detectives saw two men jump out of the helicopter. They were dressed in dark clothes and didn't look at all like the police. One of them was carrying a rifle. They were yelling something to Debby and she screamed back. The helicopter was so loud, it was impossible to hear a word they were saying.

But the situation was also so obvious—Debby and the men in the helicopter were together. The two men each switched on a powerful flashlight, and they began to search the area.

"They want us!" Bob was as white as a sheet. "Let's just get out of here. This is our only chance. If we get caught, we can't help Juve."

The men were still far enough away, but it wouldn't be long before the beam of the search lights hit them. Without hesitation, Bob and Pete took off. They jumped over branches and rocks, dived past bushes, raced across a stream and finally stopped exhausted by a fir tree.

"Pinch me," Bob said, panting. "Tell me none of this is true. I think we've landed in the middle of a nightmare. There's nothing and nobody we can count on other than ourselves. Who is good, who is evil? I just can't figure it out anymore."

"I'm beginning to feel like Mrs Sullivan," puffed Pete. "One more surprise like this and I'll be off to the nut house."

While they gasped for breath, they tried to get an overview of their location. The situation was quite hopeless. Without paying attention to their surroundings, they just ran off. But suddenly, Pete nudged Bob.

"Look over there, Bob, there's the light that Juve saw from the clearing. We are running straight towards it!"

"Right. There must be people there." Bob didn't need long to think. "Then the best thing to do is to get help fast. Maybe there's even a phone there. We cannot free Juve against the armed men alone. We must hurry up and get help!"

In fact, Jupiter's situation was getting serious. After storming into the Indian teepee, he quickly looked around. He knew he had very little time.

The teepee looked bigger on the inside than from the outside. There was a bright lamp that lit everything well, but there was not much to see. A makeshift device wrapped in a plastic sheet stood there, and it looked like a power generator. Next to it, some spotlights were gathering dust. A clothesline was rolled up around several large batteries. And what was this cheap plastic creepy mask that was attached to the wall? It had two big glass eyes that seemed to stare at him. None of this looked like a real Indian teepee.

On the ground was a sleeping bag. Next to it was a bag—a brown leather bag which was half opened. Jupiter reached for it and opened it fully. A flat object slipped out, wrapped in newspaper.

Jupiter was about to put it in his pocket when he noticed something else—a key chain. It was a little black cat embedded in a glass ball. Jupiter had seen a key chain like that before. Instantly, he reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out an identical key chain—only that the cat was gold. That's the thing he picked up off the floor of the lift at Sundown TV. The key chain belonged to Mr Caddy, the boss of Sundown TV. Actually, Jupiter had intended to return it immediately, but he'd been putting it off. Two cat key chains. What was the meaning of this? That's when the door was ripped open. The man was back.

"Aha! The mouse is trapped," he shouted and got in. The door closed. The man threatened Jupiter with a gun to make it unmistakably clear who had the upper hand.

"Lie on the ground, with your hands behind your back!"

Jupiter did as he had been ordered. That was the best thing for now. He still had three helpers outside. The man grabbed the clothesline and began to tie Jupiter's hands.

Suddenly, the door opened and Debby appeared. Jupiter saw her out of the corner of his eye. New hope flashed through him. But contrary to Juve's expectations, the man passed his gun to Debby! Then she turned her back, went out of the teepee and threatened Pete and Bob.

Desperately Jupiter closed his eyes. So she was working with the bank robber. His suspicions were justified.

The man continued to tie Jupiter's feet. When he was finished, he stood up, laughed and stuck his thumb up. For a brief moment, Jupiter thought that there was someone else in the teepee. Then he realized that the man had looked in the direction of the plastic mask.

At that very moment, Jupiter saw the light. In one fell swoop, many of the seemingly unrelated details came together.

"So that's what this is all about," Juve murmured, and then shouted loudly: "You rascals!"



## 15. Eavesdropping

Pete and Bob hurried as fast as they could. Pete had an advantage in terms of fitness, but Bob made up for it with his strong will. So it didn't take long until they got close to the light they had seen from the clearing. After they had first run cross-country, they had it almost comfortable in the last few metres because they were on a path that led in the right direction. Only one more turn, then they would be at their destination.

The two boys stopped at the edge of the forest. It was a simple car park lamp which they had noticed from a distance. It shone down from the roof of a house cleverly integrated into the landscape. Five vehicles were parked in the small forecourt. They were mainly expensive off-road vehicles.

Pete let his eyes slide over the cars and startled. "There's one car we know."

"Which one?"

"The second from the right. Mr Caddy. The one who parked in front of your car at Sundown TV."

"You're right! That's that ape's car," Bob said. "It's amazing that he's here, of all people."

"What does it matter? In an emergency, he should help us. Come, there is the entrance."

Bob held Pete back. Somehow, he didn't like Caddy being here. But he had no reason why it couldn't have been just a coincidence.

"Perhaps it would be better—" he began.

"You're right!" Pete already nodded. "Let's split up, in case something goes wrong. One of us will check this place out..."

"... And the other one takes the entrance," Bob added. "I go around the house and you ring the door bell."

Pete agreed. Bob hid behind one of the cars and watched Pete run towards the house.

There was a small marble stone embedded in the floor by the footpath. Pete bent down. "Los Altos," he read so loud that Bob could hear it. "Owner—William Caddy." He guessed right—the house belonged to the boss of Sundown TV.

In a few steps, Pete was at the entrance. An automatic light came on. Pete ignored it and knocked on the heavy wooden door. It wasn't long before someone opened it. Bob recognized him immediately, although the man was not wearing sunglasses this time. He was wearing a well-fitting casual sweater and light pleated trousers. There's no doubt it was Mr Caddy himself.

"Pete," exclaimed Mr Caddy in surprise. "You? Here? ... Come on in. Where's Bob?"

"Sir," Pete cried excitedly in between. "Good that you are here! We need your help. Jupiter is in danger! He was captured by a bank robber. Sir, you must notify the police—"

Bob heard the Second Investigator suddenly falter. What's wrong with him, Bob thought. But in that same moment, he realized what Pete had stumbled upon.

Mr Caddy had called Pete by his name, and he asked about Bob as well. But how did he know their names? The encounter in the lift had been very brief, and Caddy probably wouldn't even have recognized them again, as absent and disinterested as he had been looking through his dark sunglasses. To him, they had been just boys, but above all, why had

he specifically asked about him, Bob, but not about Jupe? Did he already know that Jupe was a prisoner?

With presence of mind, Pete yelled: "Bob stayed in the forest, near Jupiter! I ran over here—" Pete was pulled into the house. With one blow, the door slammed shut.

Bob's legs trembled. Things were getting tricky. Jupe was trapped. Pete probably didn't fare any better in there either. Somehow his premonition seemed to be confirmed. Caddy was totally involved in this whole thing. There was no other explanation for his actions. But what was the connection? And how did he know that Jupe was not there with them? Bob thought someone must have called him—Debby or that bank robber. But what has Mr Caddy got to do with them? And how were the two men in the helicopter involved in this story in any meaningful way?

But Bob had no time to think. Jupe and Pete were now out of the game. Now all responsibilities lay with him. He had to save his friends. Luckily Pete had reacted so brilliantly, otherwise Caddy would have had the surroundings of the house searched for Bob. As it was, they still had a chance. Unfortunately, Bob didn't know exactly what that was.

He decided to walk carefully around the house. It couldn't be wrong. He might find an open window or even a door. If possible, he could even enter the house, free Pete and call Inspector Cotta. But it wouldn't be easy. The number of cars suggested that there were several people in Caddy's secluded mountain cabin—and probably none of them were asleep.

Mountain cabin? Bob had to laugh as that was a gross understatement. He was standing in front of a stately house, the back of which was built into a rock face. Caddy had piled up several satellite dishes on top of the rock, probably so that he could zap all the television stations worldwide. Bob frowned. He didn't like this Caddy anymore.

He scurried along the cars and chose the side that was in the shadow of the moonlight. The night was his greatest advantage. He just had to be careful not to make any noticeable noise.

The backpack, Bob thought. He still had the backpack with him. He opened it and checked what was in it. Spare batteries for the torch, a pocket mirror, a voice recorder, his pocket knife... Bob was satisfied. He had taken the correct backpack earlier. He packed all the things back and kept scurrying.

Two unlit windows were closed. Then Bob saw a glass patio door which was opened a gap. Voices could be heard. Carefully, he crept up. He did not dare to look inside. There was too great a chance that he would be discovered. He crouched down and stayed quietly by the door.

"... That wasn't the plan, Mr Caddy! This isn't going to work out," a woman's voice just yelled.

One man supported her. "Sure! The boys must have known something! Why else would they have been so interested in the eagle heads! William, you're getting out of hand."

"Yes," yelled another. "They were acting for Mrs Sullivan! We heard it ourselves!"

"Silence, my friends!" That was Mr Caddy. Bob winced. "We got two of those brats already. And the third will be in the net soon. My men are looking for him. Then we'll give them the potion, and tomorrow they won't remember a thing. It'll be like it never happened. You can count on it, my friends. So why the need to panic?"

"We won't let ourselves be held off that easily!" another man said. "But these guys are a lot smarter than we thought, aren't they, Henry?"

"I told you so!" Henry replied. "I won all bets I bet on them! Even the ones at Debby's car. May I remind you? I was the one who bet that they would fall into our cleverly constructed trap with the bank robber within ten minutes, without Debby having to lead them

to the traces laid out. And when I predicted that Jupiter would dare go in that teepee, none of you went along with me.”

“Yes, yes, Henry,” cried one woman. “You’ve scored big this time! I bet you’ll make a million soon.”

“So what, Liza? You all have more than enough money. And the rules were the same for everyone. May I remind you—Simple Bet \$20,000, Super Bet \$50,000. But we haven’t had the chance of placing our King’s Bet of \$100,001 yet. You all stand to win back a lot of money. How about this? Let’s bet on whether Bob manages to escape. What do you say? My money’s on him!”

“No!” cried Caddy in horror.

A loud babble of voices rose, and Bob took the opportunity to move his voice recorder to a better position, although it was not easy because he was very excited.

At the same time, he thought about what he had heard—apparently several people had been sitting in this house the whole time, monitoring what was happening to them. And they had seen it as fun betting their money—a lot of money—on events that are happening out there.

Someone shouted: “But he must not escape! If he tells what kind of game we’re playing here, we’ll all be ruined! Think of our reputation!”

“But it’s not that far yet,” Henry shouted back. “Bob hasn’t the slightest idea about our game! The only thing the boys found were some wooden poles and eagle heads. So what? Max, you really are a chicken.”

“Yes,” cried another. “He’s scared he’ll be thrown off the manager’s chair at Movie Enterprise. What do you say to that, Lady Rose?”

“Oh, me? I really have no interest in us getting discovered. It would be too embarrassing. After all, I run an elite beauty parlour! The greats from Hollywood come to me! My goodness, I don’t know why I went along with this... Everything was easy with Mrs Sullivan. And that Taylor was a great victim too...”

“Cool it!” Caddy yelled. “The only one who found out something is that Jupiter. But he’ll get our potion! I’ll send for him right away.”

“I hope you’re right,” cried Max. “From the beginning, I was against taking on three victims at the same time. Now we have this situation where one of them is on the run, and of all people, it’s Bob—ironically, the quiet one! I’m sure he’ll keep his nerve! And you thought he was so cute, Amy!”

“Quiet!” Caddy yelled. “That chopper’s gonna find that guy in a minute. Hang on, I’ll switch to the picture.”

Aha, thought Bob. So they were watching on TV monitors! There must have been cameras out there. He thought about it, but he couldn’t recall anything.

Bob wanted to venture forward a little so he could look into the room. Carefully he stretched his leg. It cracked softly, but that was just his joints. Nobody should hear that, especially with all the noise inside. Bit by bit, he pushed his head forward. In a moment, he should see something for sure.

Then he felt a gentle breeze—a breath of air. There was someone behind him—very close! He wasn’t wrong. His hair stood on end and his heart stopped in fright.

It was all over. They had discovered him. Bob closed his eyes and waited. A cool hand wrapped around his mouth. It was so tight that he couldn’t scream. Bob’s blood ran cold in his veins. His eyes went black.

## 16. The King's Bet

"Take it easy, Bob!" The grip got loose. "It's me, Pete. Now keep quiet when I take my hand away!"

Bob's heart skipped a beat. It wasn't an enemy, it was a friend! Pete! And he was free! Pete pulled his hand away and let go of Bob. "Hey, Bob. Surprised?"

Still shaking all over his body, Bob turned around as if he couldn't believe it. Pete grinned up to his ears.

Bob then signalled to Pete to move away from the door to a nearby bush so that they would not be overheard.

"I'm flabbergasted... just flabbergasted," Bob started stuttering. "How did you escape?"

Pete put his hand to his lips because Bob was too loud for him.

"Caddy took me up to the first floor and locked me in a room up there," Pete whispered.

"But he forgot to take your lock picks," Bob rejoiced. Slowly he began to breathe again—and he was glad to know that he was no longer carrying the whole responsibility on his shoulders.

"Right. In fact, he didn't search me at all. I guess he didn't think it was necessary, because he locked the door from the outside with a bolt. So I could have ten sets of lock picks and still not be able to open it."

"Well, how did it work out then?" Bob asked, astonished. "The balcony door. It was locked, but I cracked it. It was just a little jump from there to the rock, you know, the one with the satellite dishes. You won't believe this, but there's a small helipad up there. Then I climbed down the back and looked for you... But tell me, something's really going on in there, isn't it?"

Bob thought about how he could quickly summarize his impressions. "They have been following us all along," he reported. "Probably with the help of cameras, I don't know. I think we are something like guinea pigs. And inside there are people who just happen to have a few hundred thousand dollars left over to bet on us. I guess for them, it's real fun but it's really a mean game."

"You mean that story about the bank robber isn't real?" Pete couldn't believe it. "But the cops? And the car? And Debby?"

"I can't tell you what's true and what's a bad dream," Bob said.

Pete pulled out a video cassette with the name 'Sullivan' on it. "If so, this should be the recording of Mrs Sullivan's ordeal. I found it in the room upstairs."

"First-rate job, Pete!" Bob took it and put it in his backpack. "Come on, let's see what's going on in there now."

They crawled back up to the door and stuck their heads out. The room wasn't even that big. Around a rectangular table sat seven people. In front of each of them was a TV monitor. Some bottles and glasses stood around. But there was something even more striking—each person had stacks of banknotes in front of them. One man had piled up most of the money. He was an elderly man, rather plump in stature, and had a large semi-bald head. Bob figured out that he was that Henry. William Caddy, on the other hand, sat at the head of the table and seemed to be presiding.

In the meantime, the situation had calmed down a bit. Everybody was looking intently at the screens, and at that very instant, Bob plucked Pete's sleeve excitedly because Jupiter now appeared in the picture. One could clearly see how he was being carried out of the teepee.

"Look, friends, we've got the situation under control," Mr Caddy explained with satisfaction.

"And what about our King's Bet? One hundred thousand dollars!" said Henry, the man with the semi-bald head. "We absolutely must do that. Then we're through for tonight! I suggest we bet on Bob! Does he or does he not escape? I'll bet you \$100,001 that he does."

"Henry, if you want to lose your money so bad, do it," Caddy said quietly. "But all right, if that's the way you want it, that's the King's Bet, provided you all agree. I'm gonna tell you right now that Bob is not getting away."

The murmurs that followed sounded like approval.

"Hold on!" That was Lady Rose's voice. "Before I decide, I want to see that scene where the boys run into Debby again." The woman was about fifty.

"Our cosmetic surgeon is probably hoping for another clue." One of the guests sniggered. "That didn't help Liza earlier, did it?"

"No problem, Lady Rose," Caddy said, ignoring the remark. "Hold on." He pressed a button and spoke into a microphone: "Mr Martin, please show us Debby's first encounter with the boys again."

"Mr Martin? He's the production manager at Sundown TV!" Bob whispered.

Pete nodded. "He seems to be responsible for the technology."

A picture appeared. Bob could make out his Beetle, but he couldn't see it. The picture was shaking horribly. Then the car came into view. They could see two figures—one slender and one larger figure standing beside the car.

"The right one is Juve," muttered Bob. "You can spot him right away. Debby must have been carrying the camera. But where?"

"A miniature camera, I guess." Pete moved a little closer to the door to get a better look. "My father uses these devices now and then in his work. Television uses them in sports, for example. It could have been hidden in a button, or yes, hidden in her weird glasses! Remember that thick frame?"

"That's why she was always so sensitive when you got too close!"

"Right. She was afraid the scam was gonna blow."

They peeped back into the room. Mr Caddy was showing another scene. Bob was in the picture. He was facing the camera and was just explaining to Debby that you can lose your memory if something terrible happens to you. 'Over time, depending on the severity of the event, the memory comes back. It's amnesia,' his quiet voice echoed from the speakers on the TV monitors.

"How sweet he is," cried the woman named Amy. "Much more likeable than that oversized Jupiter. I could cuddle him! Henry, you're not alone—I bet on him to escape too!"

"Bummer," Bob remarked.

"Are you crazy?" Pete pulled Bob back. Bob had been a little too loud.

Someone got up inside. He was approaching the patio door.

The detectives flinched and looked around quickly. There was no hiding place nearby. But the man just shut the door, and he went back.

Bob and Pete took a breather, but now they could barely hear what was being said inside. However, they had heard more than enough and chose to cautiously retreat. Jupiter was about to be brought here.

It was not too early either, because when they reached the parked cars, an SUV drove up with crunching tyres. A man got out, closed the driver's door and looked into the back seat through the window.

"All right, fatty, I'm gonna go get your buddy. You'll get the potion and then it's good night! Tomorrow morning, you'll wake up by the side of the road with a little headache." He laughed gloatingly. "And you will not remember anything about this nightmare!"

Then he went purposefully towards the house.

"It was that alleged bank robber in the teepee!" hissed Pete.

The man knocked on the door, and a little later, Mr Caddy appeared.

"Hey, Joe, where'd you put that guy?" Mr Caddy asked.

Joe? That's the policeman who searched Bob's Beetle!

"In the car. Tied up. He won't lift a finger."

"That's it. Come on in. First we mix the drink, then we get the other one. Only Bob, unfortunately, is still in the woods. Have you seen him?"

"Not yet. Scott is still looking for him." Joe then went into the house.

As soon as the door was slammed shut, Bob and Pete acted with lightning speed. Bob got into the back seat of Joe's SUV to take care of Jupe, who was tied up, while Pete jumped into the driver's seat.

The Second Investigator breathed a sigh of relief. The keys were in the car! "That idiot is not a real pro anyway," he murmured and checked the operating instruments.

At the back seat, Bob carefully pulled the plaster off Jupe's mouth.

"Thank you, Bob and Pete," Jupe gave a sigh of relief. Of course, he wanted to know what had happened to his two friends, but they had to get out of there first.

Bob took out a knife to work on Jupiter's shackles. However, he saw that the rope on Jupiter's wrists were too tight and he needed time to free him. Those people had really wrapped him up like a mummy. Totally unprofessional, as Jupiter thought.

"Quick, Pete," Bob cried. "We've got to move off now before they discover you missing up there and come back out."

Suddenly, Pete turned around and said: "Give me your knife, Bob. I have to take some precautions."

Pete grabbed the knife and rushed over to the parked cars and started to work on the tyres. It wasn't an easy task, but finally he had it done.

"Well, their cars are all flat," the Second Investigator happily said as he got back into the driver's seat of the SUV, and handed the knife back to Bob. "Too bad for those clowns, but it looks like Henry and Amy are going to win their bet."

"If you don't hurry, Caddy will win," said Bob. "And besides, they've got the helicopter! Don't forget that."

Pete nodded and immediately started the car and reversed out. He stopped, changed gears and accelerated. The gravel splashed backwards and the car zoomed off fast.

## 17. About-Turn

Pete was a great driver especially in situations like this, and the car was a good off-road vehicle—but even the best one would have had a hard time on a forest path like this. And then, there was one other problem—the remaining fake policemen were out there with the helicopter.

They decided that they should get out of the mountains and head back to Rocky Beach as soon as possible. To do this, Pete had to find the way back to the mountain road and then take the shorter route out to the main road.

Bob had his hands full trying to free Jupiter from his shackles. The rocking was making him dizzy and fuzzy. Either the knife fell out of his hand or he ran the risk of injuring his friend. Eventually, Bob did it. Jupiter sat up and rubbed his wrists and stretched.

The First Investigator was quite surprised when Bob told him about the strange gathering in the out-of-the-way house. But the mention of William Caddy seemed not to surprise him. “I suspected as much,” he said.

“You know Caddy’s behind this?” Bob asked.

“Sure I do. Look what I found in the teepee—a key chain with a black cat—exactly the same as the one that Caddy dropped in the lift at Sundown TV, except that on Caddy’s key chain, the cat is gold. You know—the executive version. The cat must be the common symbol of the group that’s doing all this. Unfortunately I had completely forgotten the key chain, because in our dreams we would never have thought that Caddy would be in charge of this whole thing.”

“Yes, I do.” Bob continued to tell Juve what they had learned about the money betting.

Bob’s report proved what Jupiter had already deduced whilst being tied up in the Indian teepee. “The black cat, Caddy’s gold cat, Sundown TV, the spotlights and the power generator also pointed to this. Also there was a stupid plastic mask hanging on the wall. When the man who captured me made his victory gesture in front of the mask, it was clear to me that there must be a camera hidden in one of the mask’s two glass eyes. Such a pose was meant for spectators. Somewhere they had to sit and watch it all—like a reality TV show. And suddenly it became clear to me what I had missed from the beginning. I don’t mean the key chain, but a simple, clear, logical context...”

“And then, there’s what we believe is a recording of Mrs Sullivan’s ordeal,” Bob said and took out the video cassette and handed it to Jupiter. “Pete got it from the house.”

“Great work, Pete!” Jupiter remarked. “If this is what you say it is, then we have all the evidence we need to put Caddy away...”

But they could not go into the subject in any further depth. Ahead of the car, there was a woman standing at the side of the road, waving at them. Pete slowed down sharply.

The Three Investigators knew the woman by now—the double-crosser. Pete lowered the window. “Debby? What are you doing here? Aren’t you with your people?”

Debby held her shoes in her hand. She went barefoot. “My feet have blisters,” she said. “And I’m freezing. These clothes are not for nature!”

Pete tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and looked annoyingly straight ahead.

Then Debby looked into the back seat. “Bob? Jupiter? You’re all here? How did you manage to escape?”

“Again, what are you doing out here?” Pete asked Debby.

“I didn’t want to be a part of it anymore, so I left. It’s no fun anymore.” She wiped some dirt off her arm. “I know I’ve been a bad sport to you, but I beg of you... Take me with you.”

Pete turned around and looked at Jupiter and Bob. Jupe looked strained through the other window, and Bob whistled quietly to himself. They did not want to have anything more to do with Debby.

“Fellas?” Pete asked. “She left the gang. You heard her.”

There was again no response from Jupe and Bob.

“Please,” Debby said. “Don’t leave me here.”

“How would we know that you will not play us out again?” Jupiter suddenly asked.

Debby kept quiet for a moment and then said: “Look! Like I said, I have had enough of Caddy’s game. If you have doubts about me, how about you tie my hands up and then take me with you. I just want to get out of here.”

Jupiter continued to study the landscape, pinching his lower lip. After a few seconds, he moaned: “Never mind, get in,” even though he was not sure whether he could trust her.

“Thank you,” she mumbled.

Bob got out from the back seat and moved to the front passenger seat as Debby got in next to Jupe.

Jupe was thinking that if Debby really meant what she had just said, then she might be a good witness to expose this scam by Caddy.

As Pete continued on with the journey, Debby said: “I’m sorry. Really, I’m sorry. I should never have gone along with this. But you see, Mr Caddy offered me a great part on a TV series if I’d help him with his sinister game. Up to now, Sundown TV has always given me small supporting roles, and I wanted so much to be a star!”

Jupiter interrupted her. “Now I remember!” he exclaimed and turned to Debby. “You’re ‘Sheila’ from that TV series *Noblewoman*. You play the Countess’s maid. That’s why you looked so familiar to me!”

“You watch *Noblewoman*?” she asked incredulously.

Jupiter shook his head. “No, but my aunt indulges herself in that show now and then. Sometimes I watch for a few minutes to know what’s going on,” he added.

“My name isn’t Debby or Sheila, by the way. They’re both just roles I play. My real name is Susan.”

Bob laughed. “Susan? I’m sorry. I’m not gonna get used to this tonight. Do you mind if I keep calling you Debby?”

“No, of course not.”

Pete drove over a hilltop, and he took a long, hard look at the sky. Was he wrong, or had dawn really begun? The moon had moved quite a distance. Luckily, he could find no sign of Caddy’s helicopter, but it was still some distance to the main road.

“Debby, were you involved in the abduction of Mrs Sullivan and Mr Taylor?” Bob asked.

“Yes, I’m afraid I must admit it. We are always the same team. The last times I only played along, but today I was supposed to take over the major role—the one who is supposed to put you back on track when you get stuck.” She laughed. “But it was hardly necessary, as quickly as you read the situation. However, you scared me a lot.”

“When we mentioned Mrs Sullivan at the clearing with the poles?” Jupiter interjected.

“Right. That’s when I realized something was wrong. You certainly knew a bit too much. Then I retreated to some bushes and made a quick call to Mr Caddy for instructions.”



“And he gave you orders to stop the action and take us prisoners at the Indian teepee?” Jupiter surmised.

Debby nodded.

“How many of these experiments have you already undertaken?” Jupiter wanted to know.

“This is the fourth. The first time, everything went completely wrong. The chosen victim, a truck driver, beat up two of the actors so badly that they couldn’t appear on TV for a week. At that time, Caddy hadn’t constructed the story we were going to play out safely enough. The next time it got better...”

Jupiter took the floor. “Because Caddy found out that Mrs Sullivan was to drive through the Magic Mountains.”

“Right,” Debby said. “Caddy thought she was a good victim. The task was to get her off the highway and onto the side road. With her, we did it with a truck. He remained in front of her, forced her to stop, and then she was kidnapped—”

“—To the clearing with the poles,” Jupe continued. “Then you performed the Indian rituals while Caddy, Henry, Max and—what were the names of the others?”

“Amy, Lady Rose, Liza, and one other man,” Bob added. “And this league of cats sat in front of the screens, had a great time and made their expensive bets.”

“On what?” Jupe asked.

“Whether she’s scared and runs away, whether she even believes this Indian ritual. She also had to take part in various ceremonies and then there were bets on how she would perform.”

“A mean game,” Jupe remarked. “The victims are the guinea pigs and they don’t know about the secret viewers.”

“Yeah,” Debby affirmed.

“After that, Mrs Sullivan was given the potion, and then was dropped off in her car by the side of the road,” Jupe continued. “What is this potion anyway?”

“It erases the memory of the last hours. It must be dosed carefully though, because it is dangerous. One of the group members runs a pharmaceutical company that deals with all kinds of drugs. They even supply them to the Secret Service—at least that’s what Joe told me. Joe’s the guy who acted as the bank robber. He’s a nice guy, actually.”

“I hardly think so,” Jupiter said and rubbed his wrists.

Pete, who was focussed on the driving, had only listened the whole time. He was glad that the conversation had got going so well. He was able to show understanding for Debby, while his anger was mainly directed at Caddy and his friends.

“Why does the show always take place under a full moon?” Bob asked. “Does it give you more creeps? I thought a new moon might be scarier.”

Before Debby could say anything, Pete gave the answer: “The light is best during a full moon.” He looked up at the sky. There was still no sign of Caddy’s helicopter.

Jupiter took up his old thread again. “After Mrs Sullivan, you became bolder. Caddy and his gang was probably watching and selecting cars on the flat long stretch of road, and finally picked up Taylor. The helicopter checks if the road was really clear. The diversion sign was put up and as soon as Taylor’s car has passed, it was removed, so that the other cars continue on the main road.

“Now the victim was isolated, and the story could run. A spook starts, for which an exact script was available. You did the bear thing with Taylor. The only thing that confused me was the UFO. It’s not right. But Pete led us to the solution, only that we didn’t catch on.”

“What?” asked Pete.

“You yourself first thought that the helicopter was a UFO! That noise! Those bright beams! And it was similar in Taylor’s traumatic memory. He thought he saw a UFO too.”

“But Taylor denied everything,” Bob objected. “I almost believed he was just a copycat who heard about Mrs Sullivan’s experience and was now trying to muscle in to make money.”

“No, he really experienced it,” said Jupiter. “But when he—”

But that was as far as he got. Pete suddenly cried out in horror. Curious, Jupiter and Debby bent over in the middle to see better.

It was spooky. In front of them, in the middle of the path, Caddy’s helicopter blocked their passage. The spotlights were on and shining straight at the SUV. Like a dragonfly, it was ready to attack. Apparently, Caddy had tracked their escape route and got ahead to trap them.

The SUV didn’t stand a chance against this monster. There wasn’t enough room at the sides to get past the helicopter. And it was no use turning around as they were still on the mountain road.

Pete had no choice but to stop, and immediately he started whining: “In a moment, they will threaten us with their guns and administer the potion. Then we’ll wake up with no memory of what happened. Even though we’ve now got it all figured out, fellas, unfortunately, it was for nothing.”

“The video cassette,” stammered Bob. “If we could hide it now, we’ll have something to go back to later.”

“Where are we gonna hide it?” Pete said. “It’s too late now. They will find it!”

At that instant, two men with rifles jumped out from the helicopter. A small staircase was lowered and Caddy appeared.

It was so quiet that only The Three Investigators could hear it when Debby said: “Don’t be afraid of the rifles. They’re from a TV production, and they’re not real. Nothing is real, all are movie props, including the gun I was holding. Even the car we had set up down in the valley was from a TV programme.”

Step by step, Caddy and his two henchmen approached the SUV. The Three Investigators could see that he was carrying four glass vials—two in each hand. In each of those vials was a liquid that shimmered milky white in the moonlight.

“It’s all or nothing now,” said Jupiter. “If we drink that stuff, Caddy’s story will never come out.”

## 18. Cat and Mouse

“He has four glass vials?” Debby remarked. “Why?”

“One is for you, Debby,” Jupe said, “because you are running away.”

“Very good eye,” Caddy said, cutting in. He had overheard Jupiter’s answer. “You get to drink one of this, Debby, you unreliable bitch! You know too much!”

“But... no one has ever been given such a dose...” Debby stammered. “What you have here is more than usual...”

“That’s right, Debby,” Caddy said. “That stuff will mess up that pretty head of yours real good—maybe forever, but it’s too late. You’ve made your choice.”

Caddy’s two henchmen now positioned themselves, one on each side of the SUV.

“Now all of you, get out of the car!” Caddy ordered. His two henchmen proceeded to open the car doors.

After the four of them were gathered in front of the Sundown TV owner, Caddy held out the vials and said: “Go ahead, help yourself. And don’t give me any trouble, I’ve still got plenty of this stuff.”

Jupiter felt cold down his back. He decided to play for a while first. “Mr Caddy,” he started. “What you and your fancy betting group are doing is a crime! Kidnapping, assault, I don’t know what to say. It’s a cynical game for which you must be punished.”

“What’s with the lecture, Mr Know-It-All?”

Jupiter would not be interrupted. “What you are doing is all a big bluff. You used the legends of the Accipi Indians to create an impressive backdrop to scare your victims. I bet the wooden pole set-up in the clearing isn’t real either. And when the myth of the eagle’s head and the bear man was played out, you thought: ‘Let’s try a detective story for a change’. Then you made up the bank robbery story. When your fake policemen checked us out, you were on to us. I have to admit, that was pretty clever. And the clues in the black car were well laid out. We found them and interpreted them exactly as you had planned.”

Jupiter looked him straight in the eyes. “But in the end, it was all for show. Nothing was real. We’re not even afraid of your movie guns. You can’t even shoot with them.” The First Investigator took a breath. He hoped his last sentence didn’t miss the mark.

But Caddy only drew his face to a thin smile. “Are you willing to go for it, friend? Are you really that sure? Maybe one of these is a real live gun.”

Jupiter swallowed but did not let it show. “We know everything now and it is engraved in our brain. We will survive your potion,” claimed Jupiter.

Caddy just laughed.

“When we wake up again, we will have many starting points to find out the truth bit by bit. Taylor, for example.”

“What do you know about Taylor?” he asked sharply.

“He runs from newspaper to newspaper offering his story.”

“Taylor won’t say anything.”

“Because you pumped him full of money to keep him quiet. Unfortunately, I overlooked this crucial connection, otherwise we would have found out about you much earlier. So Taylor turned up on Sundown TV and visited Mr Martin, your production manager who, of

course, knew about the experience of his secretary, Mrs Sullivan. If Martin didn't have anything to do with this, he should have been curious. But the opposite was true. He threw Taylor out. And after consulting with you, Mr Caddy, he stuffed Taylor's mouth with money. But will he keep him quiet forever?"

Caddy began to get restless.

Jupiter quickly ignited the next stage. "And finally, we have this." To the horror of his friends, Jupiter pulled out the video cassette.

"The recording of Mrs Sullivan's ordeal," he said. "Do you recognize this? Pete found this in your house. But guess what? This is only the case. We hid the video cassette in a safe place somewhere in the forest. You'll never find it. But we will get it when the time is right. We wrote the place down in code, so even if we forget it, we can use the code to retrieve it. Then, we'll have the police come after you."

Caddy turned pale. "You... you rascals..." he said in a slightly trembling voice.

Surprisingly, Debby now intervened. "Scott and Joe. Are you sure you still want to be a part of this? This isn't fun. This is serious. Do you wanna take the rap for Caddy and get deep into a crime? ... You're both actors, not gangsters... I'm getting out, and so should you!"

The two men with the rifles looked at each other briefly. They nodded, turned around and hesitantly walked back to the helicopter.

Caddy stared at them. "Hey, you two!" he yelled. When they didn't respond, he ran after them. Caddy stumbled up the stairs and disappeared inside the helicopter.

"Scott and Joe have nothing to lose anyway," commented Debby. "They have even worse roles than me in *Noblewoman*."

They saw the rotor blades begin to turn and the helicopter gained height.

"I think we better get out of here," Pete said.

As they were getting back into the car, Debby called out: "Hey, Jupiter... Where is the video cassette anyway?"

"I have hidden it in the car," Juve replied.

"Well, at least your bluff worked brilliantly," she said appreciatively. "It gave me the perfect opportunity to convince Scott and Joe."

Some time later, they reached the outskirts of Rocky Beach. The streets were deserted as it was still very early on Sunday morning. For the rest of the journey back, they had not talked much as they were all very tired and needed to catch up on some sleep.

They had planned to go straight to Inspector Cotta a little later in the morning to lodge the case, and most of all, to get William Caddy arrested. Before that, they would contact Mrs Sullivan to join them for the police report. After all, she was their client and they were sure that she would be amazed. They also had to arrange to get Bob's Beetle back.

With eyes glassy with tiredness, Pete steered the SUV to front gate of The Jones Salvage Yard. Jupiter got out and opened the gate so Pete could drive into the yard. At last, they were back home.

After Bob and Pete had disappeared into the trailer to lie down, Jupiter took a deep breath. The morning was still pleasantly cool, the sun shining its first light on the salvage yard. A light breeze was blowing.

Soon Aunt Mathilda would get up and like every morning, the first thing she would do was to open the curtains in her bedroom. Then she would go make breakfast. Juve looked forward to it like never before. The nightmare was finally over. The events of the past night seemed almost unreal to him now.

Debby was curled up sleeping in the back seat of the SUV. Jupiter decided not to wake her up. Instead, he walked towards the trailer, and sat down on the steps to enjoy the dawning day and let his thoughts wander.

A slight rattling noise alerted him. It was the neighbourhood cat that strolled by calmly in its morning patrol. Its cool eyes fixed on Jupe briefly. Was that a silent reproach in the cat's gaze?

Jupiter laughed at that thought.